The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN®
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY 2007

Masterpieces of Murder

Michael Z. Lewin
Natasha Cooper
J. F. Freedman

$3.99 U.S. / $4.99 CAN.
05>
0 75470 08599 4
www.themysteryplace.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

GOOD NOOSE!

Our Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine Value Pack saves you 65% on award-winning mystery fiction!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE
ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE
ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE
Amos Walker wonders if a disgraced cop can return to Square One
BY LORENZ D. ESTLEMAN
Plus: Rex Burns R.T. Lawton Margaret Maron

Get 4 gripping back issues of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* at a fraction of their original price.

A $17.96 value—yours for just $5.95!

SAVE 65%

Order your value pack today!

DELL MAGAZINES
Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

☑ **YES!** Please send me my **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine Value Pack.** I get 4 back issues for just $5.95 plus $2 shipping and handling ($7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My payment of $_____ is enclosed. (AHPK04)

Name: _____
(Please print)

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ **ZIP:** _____

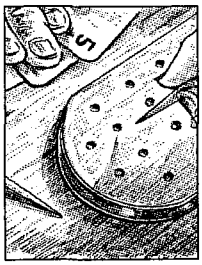
Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add $4 additional shipping and handling for delivery outside the U.S.A.
Offer expires 6/30/08.

17C-NQHVL3

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAY 2007

CONTENTS



Contemplating crime
Page 82

Murder at sea
Page 92

Cover illustration by Frederic Glass, courtesy of George Hagenauer

Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY
10016

Note: indicia on page 144

www.themysteryplace.com

FICTION

Jangle BY BRYNN BONNER 2
The People in the Flat Across the Road
BY NATASHA COOPER 21
Boy Inside the Man BY SARAH WEINMAN 26
Clara's Sacrifice BY J. F. FREEDMAN 31
They Never Listen BY MICHAEL Z. LEWIN 82
D'ya Hear Me? BY MICHAEL Z. LEWIN 87
Swift Among the Pirates BY EDWARD D. HOCH ... 92
Mother's Milk BY CHRIS SIMMS 105
Don't You Hate Having Two Heads?
BY CHRISTINE POULSON 116
Pool Players Are Nice People
BY WILLIAM BANKIER 129

SPECIAL FEATURE

EQMM Readers Award 138

REVIEWS

Blog Bytes BY ED GORMAN 30
The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 140

PASSPORT TO CRIME

World Savings Day in Hamminkeln
BY JÜRGEN EHLERS 123

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

The Book Case
BY DALE C. ANDREWS & KURT SERCU 53

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Laurie Harden

JANGLE

by Brynn Bonner

If this scene were unfolding in a movie I'd be the cynical chick in the third row muttering, "Oh, *pul-leeze,* give me a break" right about now. Things like this do not happen in real life. At least not to me.

This was the most raggedy-assed garage sale I'd been to this month. The house was a 'fifties-era ranch sitting on a flat lot, a For Sale sign planted whomper-jawed in a patch of mangy grass out front. The garage was brimming with all manner of worn-out flotsam and jetsam, some of which had been regurgitated onto rickety sawhorse tables in the driveway. It looked so sad I'd almost skipped it altogether.

But now in the gray light inside the garage I stood frozen—awestruck by what I was holding in my hand. The noxious smells of used motor oil, insecticides, and mildew flooded my nostrils and I willed myself not to hyperventilate.

I've been scouring garage sales and flea markets for years ferreting out good vinyl records. It's getting harder now that people have tipped to their value, but that just adds to the challenge. I've made some decent finds in my time, but I count the day a wild success if

©2007 by Brynn Bonner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I snag a couple of LPs in a dollar bin that I can turn over for twenty bucks apiece. My dreams are modest. *This* was in another category altogether!

I've been obsessed with records since I was a kid. 'Course, back then they weren't collectibles. They were the natural way to listen to music: as God intended—hisses, pops, and all. It makes me feel old to realize I'm in the cusp generation where CDs came along and took the humanity out of the experience, reducing those fragile, tactile grooves to a sterile string of ones and zeros.

But twenty-nine isn't old. In fact it's pretty young to be on a second career. I used to be a respectable CPA, but I've recently come to own a vintage vinyl shop. Therefore I could legitimately claim it's just business for me to be out on weekends pawing through people's discards. But I'd be doing it anyway. It's a sickness, really, this collecting thing. Not that I'd *ever* take the cure.

Robert L. Fish Award winner Brynn Bonner launches a new series this issue featuring amateur sleuth Session Seabolt, the owner of a vintage vinyl record store. "I think the record collecting/rock music backdrop will resonate with lots of us old hippies," she says. The pseudonymous author lives in North Carolina and is currently at work on a mainstream literary novel. She's had several previous stories in *EQMM*.

My hands shook as I tucked the album into the middle of the stack I had set aside and hugged them to my chest, hoping nobody had noticed my reaction.

The homeowner was a nice middle-aged guy. He'd been chatting with me and I gave him a smile, trying not to look so dazed he'd take me for a pothead, which he might well have, considering the raft of 'sixties psychedelic record jackets I was clutching.

"Got you some good jangle, huh?" he said, pointing to the records.

"What?" I asked, the word coming out an octave higher than I'd intended.

"Jangle pop. That guitar sound," the man said, tapping the copy of The Byrds' *Mr. Tambourine Man* on the top of the stack. It was the 1971 pressing with the orange label. I could probably get four or five bucks for it—a good return on my dollar investment but chump change compared to what I had sandwiched in the stack.

"Yeah," I said, trying out the smile again. "I like jangle pop."

He nodded. "Me too. Like to listen to it first thing in the day. You know, like Dylan said, 'in the jingle-jangle morning.'" He sang the words.

I nodded and stretched the smile wider, feeling a snake of guilt slithering up my spine. The man had no clue what he had. And I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was about to plunk down a few crumpled dollar bills and walk out of here with a record I could get a thousand dollars for in a heartbeat—maybe more, maybe *lots* more. I wouldn't know what I really had until I could listen to it and authenticate it.

But all was fair in love, war, and garage sales, right? He was selling; I was buying. I had nothing to feel guilty about. So why did I?

Because I hate taking advantage of someone's ignorance, especially a nice guy like him. He was about Daddy's age, with a slight paunch, a hairline in full retreat, and a smile that made his eyes crinkle. I liked him, but then I'm predisposed to liking older men. I grew up with Daddy's bandmates always around and they all doted on me. And no, nothing hinky—ever. I'd trust any one of them with my very life.

This guy had been talking bands and rock trivia as I flipped through his record collection. The albums were well cared for and he was obviously attached to them, but his wife was making him get rid of them, he told me with a grimace. Which made me wonder what kind of a shrew he'd married.

"We're moving to a condo and she says they'll junk up the place. Anyhow, she's partial to country-and-western," he said, pulling a face.

I shook my head from side to side and gave him a sympathetic *tsk*.

"Hey," he said, "you got something to play those on? There's a nice little turntable over there. And some speakers, too."

I opened my mouth to tell him I had a setup that probably cost more than his car, but thought better of it. "Yes, I've got my daddy's old stereo with a turntable," I said, which was true. Of course, full disclosure would have meant telling him my father was Sonny Seabolt, the former lead guitarist for Copper Hill and one of the pickiest men on the planet when it came to sound reproduction. But why go there?

"Well, that's good then," he said, his blue eyes getting a faraway look. "I was just kind of hoping that turntable would go to somebody who'd actually use it and groove on it like I did back in the day, listening to these." He ran a hand over the ridged tops of the records still in the crate and let out a wistful sigh.

Geez, he was killing me.

"Okay," I said, "let me take a look."

The receiver was a piece of junk and the speakers were a step above tin cans, but the turntable wasn't half bad. I looked at the ten-dollar sticker—way underpriced. The speakers, on the other hand, were ten apiece and the receiver fifteen. Highway robbery. But who was I to point a finger?

"Let me think about it," I told him, even though I already knew I'd buy the stuff just to assuage my guilt. I'd keep the turntable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and junk the rest.

I noticed two women looking at an iridescent glass bowl—the kind you arrange fruit in. Decorator stuff. I pegged the women as what my friend Dave calls "glassies." They're at every flea market bird-dogging Depression glass, milk glass, crystal, and other things that shatter. I saw these two look at one another, their postures stiffening. They looked like twin meerkats. They had an earnest whispered conversation, snatched up the bowl, and headed for the rickety card table where the wife was ringing up sales.

She was an icicle of a woman, narrow and brittle—and obviously cold since she was making her husband get rid of his vinyl. As my daddy might say, that's pure-d, double-damn cold.

She eyed the two glassies, then peeled off the masking-tape sticker with her acrylic talons. "This isn't for sale," she said, setting the bowl carefully on the floor against the wall behind her.

"But it had a price on it," one of the women protested. She was a slender Junior League type with a hundred-dollar highlighting job and I'd bet she was accustomed to getting what she wanted when she revved up that high-decibel whine.

"Mistake," the woman said, her mouth turning down at the corners as if it might melt right off her face like something in a Dali painting. "Wasn't supposed to be out here," she said. "That was my mama's and I wouldn't part with it for the world." Her drawn-on eyebrows migrated defiantly north on her forehead until it looked like they should have had a sign beneath them announcing umpteen million burgers sold.

The way I figured it, that precious bowl would be at the antique appraiser's by the end of the week. Be cool, I warned myself, this woman's got radar. I browsed the table of knickknacks pretending to consider each item, but the records clutched to my chest felt like they were going to catch fire if I didn't get out of there soon. I picked up a ceramic dish with a chip in the rim and a best-selling thriller so the records wouldn't get too much scrutiny and headed for the table.

One of the big-hat country singers was crooning away on a stereo inside the house. I didn't recognize the song—something about the sun. I like a little Johnny Cash now and again, and some days nobody but Willie or Waylon will cure what's ailing me, but the current crop doesn't do it for me, so I don't keep up much on country.

"Hi there," I said, real friendly, as I started digging in my bag for cash.

The woman didn't answer. She picked up the dish and studied the sticker, punching with long skinny fingers on a small calculator. She counted the records—twice—and punched some more, then slung words at me. "Eleven seventy-five. You want a bag?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She was overcharging me by three dollars and I didn't think it was accidental, but the less attention I drew the better, so I decided to let it go. I had my money ready, but when I looked up, the man was standing behind his wife looking all sad-eyed as he wiped the dustcover of the turntable with a cloth.

"You know, I think I'll take that stereo equipment too. Could you box it up for me?" I asked.

"Sure thing," he answered, perking up.

"Bring it all over here and let me get the prices off first. That's your old set, right?" the woman said, her voice smoker-low and gravelly.

"Yep," he answered, and heaved a sigh. "Give her the whole shebang for thirty, Alma."

"Price that's on 'em's what they cost, Hank," Alma answered, snipping off the end of each word like she was pinching off the heads of flowers.

Hank looked at me and pursed his lips, giving me an apologetic shrug. I shrugged back to let him know I appreciated the try.

"Hey," I said cheerfully, looking from one to the other. "If you want to make me a good price, I might be interested in taking all the rest of the records off your hands."

Hank smiled broadly, but didn't get a word out.

"Price that's *on* them is what they cost," Alma said again, her voice flat. "See that?" She lifted a skeletal arm toward the wall of the garage behind her. The handmade sign read NO CHECKS, NO HAGGLING, NO RETURNS. ALL SALES FINAL. She swiped her hand in the air as if I didn't know to read from left to right. I could have sworn I heard her bones clattering as she put her arm back down on the table.

My guilt was now completely purged. "Okay," I said, trying to keep a Cheshire-cat grin off my face. "That'll be it, then."

Hank carried the stereo to my car for me. "I was watching, you picked some great records," he said, nodding at my bag. "I worked at a record store when I was a kid and half my paycheck went right back to the store every week. I always had the latest releases. You got some good ones."

A fellow vinyl junkie. How could I do this to him? But I steeled myself with a glance at his witch of a wife and climbed behind the wheel of my getaway vehicle.

I pulled over and parked as soon as I was around the first corner. I wiped my hands on my jean legs and carefully pulled out the gem, holding my breath.

The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan, mono, CL-1986, near mint. Hank may not have been house-proud, but he was very particular with his records, God love him. The vinyl was glossy and the label crisp. The spindle hole was unbruised. The jacket's colors were still vibrant and it had been stored vertical so no ring wear, that tell-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tale sign that records have been stacked atop one another so the record embosses an impression into the cover. Only a tiny seam split in the bottom not even an inch long. Now the only question was, what was on the vinyl.

There are numerous permutations of this album. Its legend began back in 'sixty-three when Dylan walked out on a scheduled *Ed Sullivan Show* appearance because they wouldn't let him sing the anti-Red Scare song from this album that he had auditioned. Shortly afterwards either the record company, or maybe Dylan himself—the details are lost to the vagaries of time—pulled the album and scrubbed four tracks, including "Talkin' John Birch Blues," the song that had caused the flap. A few of the records that were already stamped got mingled in with the new release and labels and jackets got jumbled. All are valuable. Some are *very* valuable.

"Yes, indeed. I do like me some jangle," I said softly as I placed the record carefully back in the bag.

I had a hard time keeping to the speed limit as I drove back to Session's Records and Music. The store's unapologetically named for me, Session Seabolt. My mother gave me the name to spite my father, who was away doing session work when I was born. Shortly after that she upped the ante by packing all her possessions into the back of her Thunderbird and driving out into the hot August night without a backward glance, leaving me and Sonny to find our own way in the world.

There are stories of children raised by wolves. I was raised by a rock-and-roll band. I'm not sure it was any more civilized, but in the end I turned out okay.

My life revolves around this record store now, but not long ago I was a responsible young professional. I even had a mortgage. The vanilla lifestyle was my cockeyed way of rebelling against my rock-star father, I guess.

But then Uncle Eddie died and left me some money. Eddie was Copper Hill's bass player and a lifelong friend of Daddy's. They'd been through a lot together and were close as brothers, which wasn't an easy thing in their day and time since Eddie was black as midnight and Daddy is fish-belly white.

Eddie was like a second father to me and he'd known it was my dream since I was a kid to someday own a record store. So he left me the money—with the life-altering stipulation that I had to use it to get a store up and turning a profit within a year or else the money would all revert to the state Republican Party. Uncle Eddie always did know how to push my buttons.

The shop is right in the heart of the State U campus here in Raleigh. I run it with the help of my small cadre of part-time employees. Bliss Bynum is a college sophomore who yearns to be tragic and brooding, but despite her full Goth regalia her sunny

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

disposition puts the lie to it. D.J. Rives looks like a teenage skate rat, but he's actually an M.B.A. grad student. And Tenpenny Patterson is a twenty-something chameleon whose persona changes daily depending on which of his five bands he's playing with that night.

And finally there's Dave Burgess. Dave's an odd duck with a hazy background, but he knows things. He's my tenant, my Internet guy, my one-man security system, and my best friend. He's older than me and treats me like his naive little sister when I let him get away with it. He lives in an apartment he renovated in the basement of the shop. I live in an apartment above the shop and rent out my house to keep the operation lean, so I'm literally living and breathing records. And that's just fine with me.

I parked in the alley and went in the back door hoping someone was around who'd appreciate my coup. I spotted Bliss and Tenpenny talking to a small cluster of regulars at the Ultimate Band Board. This gimmick had been Tenpenny's idea and it's a popular feature. There's a weekly drawing for the privilege of posting the ultimate band lineup. People often pop into the store just to get into a yap session about what's up on the board—and sometimes they actually *buy* something.

"I could go along with you on Jimmy Chamberlain for drums," Tenpenny was saying, waggling his hand back and forth, "'cause I'm a big Smashing Pumpkins fan and it gives John Bonham's name a little rest. But Flea on bass? Clashing styles, man. I mean, I give Flea his props—" he extended both hands and bowed toward the board—"and I love me some Chili Peppers, but with Chamberlain I'd have to go with Les Claypool . . . "

He glanced in my direction, then started to turn back. But something made him do a double take. It might have been the grin installed on my face, wide as a Honda's front grille, or maybe it was the feverish glint in my eye.

"What's up? You bag a find?" he said.

"You tell me," I said, still unable to get the grin under control. I held the record out by its edges.

Tenpenny stared and Bliss actually gasped.

"Deleted tracks?" Tenpenny asked, his voice cracking.

"Don't know," I said. "Gotta go play it to find out."

I moved to the front bay window where we have a turntable setup and the whole group fell into step behind me. Suddenly I had an entourage.

Everyone was murmuring as I settled the needle ever so gently into the groove. The intro to one of the deleted tracks, "Rocks and Gravel," started in and the group fell into a stunned silence.

"Un-*friggin'*-believable," Tenpenny whispered. It was funk-band day and he had a Kangol hat snugged down backwards on his head. He snatched it off and held it over his heart.

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two days later, my find was a hot topic on the Internet loop and everyone who came in wanted to touch my hand so my luck would rub off on them. I'd had an offer of three thousand for the album on the first day and it was up to thirty-five hundred today. I was prepared to hold out for more.

I was working in the tiny office I've carved out in the back of the store as Black Sabbath played through the store's system. It was D.J.'s turn to pick the music and we were having a metal morning. I'm not normally a huge metal fan, but I was doing a little refined head-banging as I worked. I thought nothing could spoil my mood—until I looked up to see Hank and Alma in the store.

D. J. spoke to them briefly, then came and stuck his head in my doorway. My brain was whirring, trying to think of what they could be doing here—and dreading the answer. Still, I tried to convince myself maybe they'd happened to choose my shop at random to try to sell the rest of Hank's records.

"Some folks out here want to see you," D. J. said, tapping his fingers against the doorframe.

"Me?" I asked. "They asked specifically for me?"

"Yeah," D. J. said, frowning.

I squinted through a slit in the blinds. Hank was wearing a cast on his arm he hadn't had at the garage sale and his face was bruised and scraped along one of his jaws. Alma had a blustery look on her face that was enough to give me a facial tic.

"Okay, when you say they asked for me, do you mean they asked for the owner?" I asked.

"No, I mean they asked for you, Session Seabolt," D.J. answered, cocking his head to one side. "What's going on? You want me to get rid of them?"

"No, I'll talk to them," I said, wondering how they'd found me. I'd paid cash for the records and I hadn't told them my name or that I owned a record store. I came out from behind my desk and mentally prepared for battle as I walked toward them. It was probably as I'd first feared. Miss Thang had discovered the value of the *Freewheelin'* record and wanted to fight over it. Well, let her give it her best shot.

"Hello," I said pleasantly. "May I help you with something?"

"You were at our garage sale Saturday," Alma said, her voice accusing.

"Yes, I believe I was," I allowed.

"You bought something from us that wasn't supposed to be sold and we want it back," she said, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Well," I said, and gave a fake regretful sigh, "if you'll remember *your* sign—" I stretched out the words, turning to swipe at the wall behind me as she'd done the day of the sale—"NO CHECKS, NO HAGGLING, NO RETURNS, ALL SALES FINAL. Your rule, not mine."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What my wife is trying to say," Hank began, a pained expression on his face, "is we made a mistake. We sold you something that wasn't ours to sell. See, we've been storing some things for Alma's nephew and it had been so long—well, we just figured he was never coming back for the stuff, but the thing is, he did."

"I'm sorry," I said, puzzled about how the records he'd waxed all nostalgic about all of a sudden got to belong to someone else. Kind of like Alma's mama's bowl, I thought wryly. "But, again, not my problem," I said, turning up both palms. I turned to go, but Alma reached out and grabbed my arm, yanking me back a step. For a skinny woman she was surprisingly strong.

I looked down at the arm she was clutching and said through clenched teeth, "D.J., call Officer Medlin and let him know we've got a problem. He's usually just a couple of doors down at the Thai place having his lunch right about now."

"No, don't," Hank said, waving his good hand as if erasing the request. "There's no problem." He put the hand on Alma's shoulder and squeezed.

She practically threw my own arm at me and turned to walk away. "This ain't over, missy," she said, jabbing a bony finger at me before she slammed out the door.

"She's upset, is all," Hank said. "Her nephew is in a big ol' uproar about this."

I frowned. "He didn't do that to you, did he?" I asked, pointing to the cast. "This?" Hank asked, lifting the sling in my direction. "Oh no, 'course not. I fell off the ladder," he said. But he didn't meet my eyes. "Thing is, I'd be willing to pay you twice what you paid if we can just buy it back."

"Two whole dollars?" I exclaimed, huffing a laugh. "I think we both know that's not going to happen."

"Two dollars?" Hank said, looking at me with a frown. "No, seventy. You paid ten for each of the speakers and fifteen for the receiver, right? That's all I need back, the turntable was mine, but I'll buy that back too if you want. Whatever it takes." He glanced anxiously toward the door as if Alma might come storming back in.

Now it was my turn to look confused. "It's the stereo you want back?" I asked, trying to stifle a nervous laugh.

"Yes," Hank answered, tilting his head to one side and squinting at me. "What did you think we were after?"

"Could have been that chipped soap dish, for all I knew," I said, nearly giddy with relief.

"Well, no. Darnell's crazy, but he's not that crazy," Hank said. "But he's dead set on getting his stereo back." Hank's hand went to his jaw to probe the bruise. "All this is my fault. I should have realized he'd come looking for his things when he got out. I shouldn't have let Alma put the thing out for the garage sale, but she insisted."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When he got out of where? The military?" I asked, hope riding on each word.

"The pen," Hank said, then squeezed his lips hard together and gave his head a little shake. "Eight to ten, possession with intent to distribute—and assaulting the arresting officer. That boy's got a temper, been trouble every day of his sorry life. He's the black sheep of the family." Hank gave me a rueful smile. "And with *that* family," he said, jerking his head toward the door, "that's saying something."

"Look," I said, "I'd sell it back to you, but I don't have it. I gave it away. And hey, how did you get my name, and how did you know where I—work?" I asked, trying to keep from glancing up the stairs toward my apartment.

He shrugged. "Used to work for the DMV. I remember license plates—occupational hazard, I guess. Noticed yours when I was putting the stuff in your vehicle."

I wanted to tell him I've got a memory quirk too—a weird imprint trigger where a song playing will make me remember scenes of my life with disturbing clarity—sometimes more real in memory than they seemed as they were actually happening to me. But I resisted the impulse.

"The thing is, I really need to get that stereo back," Hank went on, his hand again going to his bruised jaw. "Could you tell me who it was you gave it to? Maybe they'll sell it back to me?"

We'd fired up that stereo the night I brought it home and after two minutes everybody was making a face like a bad smell had come into the room and begging me to yank the plug. The sound was flat. The bass was anemic and the treble sounded like Yoko with a head cold.

But Bliss had liked the old speaker cabinets and thought maybe she could get her sometime boyfriend Terrance to put some new speakers in. He was still in the probationary period as a boyfriend and he was always looking for ways to make points with her. So she'd taken the old amp and speakers and I'd kept the turntable.

But I wasn't about to tell Hank that. Not with the recently released Darnell out there all ticked off and wanting it back. "Let's do it this way," I told him. "I'll get up with them and ask if they're interested in selling it back to you. Best I can do."

"Sure, 'course," Hank said, tapping his good hand on the countertop. "Listen, tell 'em I'll give 'em two hundred for it, okay?"

"Two hundred?" I blurted.

Hank held up a hand. "I know. It's not worth it. Probably not worth what you paid for it. It's junk. Thing is, with Darnell, what's his is his, and this is *his* junk."

I took Hank's phone number and told him I'd be in touch. He thanked me and headed out, leaving me with one last beseeching look.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When is Bliss coming in?" I asked D.J., who was standing slack-jawed beside the counter. He stared at me blankly for a moment.

"Not till tomorrow," he said finally. "She's got finals coming up and she's studying. Wasn't very happy about it, though, said she needed the hours."

"That's okay," I said. "I think she just made herself a quick two hundred dollars."

I was diligent about locking up that night, though I was painfully aware of how inadequate my locks were. The back door didn't even have a deadbolt. It gave me the willies. Despite what Hank said about how he got his injuries, I put it on Darnell.

Daddy and his bandmates were off playing the Oldies Circuit, so they were no help. And in a stroke of bad timing, Dave was off on one of his rambles. He has a habit of disappearing occasionally. He'll be gone a few days, then just show up again without a word about where he's been. I don't know why I put up with it, but that's just Dave, and I must think he's worth it.

Even after I fell asleep, some part of me stayed vigilant, and at a few minutes after two A.M. my eyes popped open. My heart had gotten a head start and was already beating a "Wipe Out" drum solo in my chest. There were muffled scuffling noises downstairs.

I reached for the phone, cursing myself for putting off installing an alarm system. I dialed 911 and whispered to the dispatcher that I had a break-in. She said a car was on the way and told me to stay put.

Great advice. But then a thought occurred to me. The *Free-wheelin'* album was down there. What if this wasn't about Darnell and his stereo? What if it was about the record? Everyone around knew I had it. It had been blabbed all over town. I knew, because I myself had done a good deal of the blabbing. What was the point of having bragging rights if you didn't brag? The thought of someone trying to rip that off infuriated me.

If I could figure out where the noise was coming from, I could slip down the stairs, dart into my office, and scurry back up with the record. Yeah, dumb, I know, but scared and furious is a bad combination. I had a fantasy of going all Rambo on whoever it was, but that's hard to pull off in pink-striped pajama bottoms and a Hansons T-shirt.

I took my faithful Louisville slugger and crept across the floor, my bare feet avoiding the boards that squeaked. I eased open the door and listened. Nothing. I could see a few records strewn about on the floor and the anger welled in me again. I started down the stairs, stepping over one I knew groaned. I was feeling pretty good about my stealth skills when a low voice rumbling out of the darkness made my heart stop cold.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If I move, you're not going to try to knock me in the head with that damn bat of yours, are you, Session?"

"Dave?" I croaked.

"Yeah," he said. "Hey."

I flipped on the light switch and looked around. Aside from the records on the floor, everything looked fine. "When did you get back and what the hell are you doing? You scared me half to death. I thought somebody broke in."

"Well, to answer your questions in order: 'Bout an hour ago. Trying to catch 'em. Sorry. And they did," Dave said. "They bolted when I came up the stairs. Went out the back door. Any money in the till?"

"No," I said. "I went to the bank this afternoon. That's not what they were after anyway." I hurried to my office and breathed a sigh of relief when I found the album still there.

I told Dave about the record and about Darnell and his confounded stereo. He gave a low whistle. "You been busy," he said, and surveyed the store. "This was pretty half-hearted. Who knows, might not have anything to do with either of those things. Might've been just kids up to mischief." He shrugged. "Wouldn't be the first time. When the cops get here, let's not be burdening them with all this info, okay? Least not till we know what's what."

I nodded. Though Dave had friends in the Raleigh PD, he didn't like involving them in his business unless it was necessary. I felt the same way.

"Dave?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Glad you're back," I said as my knees went weak and I plopped down gracelessly on a stair.

"Yeah," he said.

The next morning I was putting the displaced records back into the bins when I looked up to see a man out on the sidewalk approaching Bliss as she neared the door of the shop.

I didn't like the looks of him. He had tattoos, which I grant you is no abnormality these days—Bliss has an impressive array of body art herself. But these looked peculiar, amateurish. And he had a paleness that I realized with sickening insight could only be described as jailhouse pallor.

He motioned toward the store and Bliss shook her head no. He stepped closer to her, scowling, and she held up a hand and backed away quickly, heading for our door.

I stiffened, expecting him to follow, but he stood still, staring stonily at Bliss's retreating figure. I shivered, despite the balmy May temps.

"Was that man bothering you?" I asked as she entered.

"Who?" Bliss asked, then turned in the direction of my nod. "Oh,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that guy. No. He's sort of sketchy, but he just wanted to know if we sell used sound equipment. I told him no, but it was like he didn't believe me or something." She shrugged.

I didn't want to alarm Bliss, but I was now very eager to get Darnell's precious stereo back to him, having just seen him up too close and personal.

I told Bliss the deal and she was elated at the prospect of the mini-windfall, but said she'd have to get the stereo back from Terrance, who'd already taken it to his place to work on it.

It was midmorning before she arrived with the cursed thing in the back of her ancient Ranchero Wagon. I called Hank and he said he'd be over in a jiffy to pick it up. I never heard a man sound so relieved.

"These speakers are heavier than they ought to be," Dave said, as he set them down in the corner of my office.

"Solid wood, maybe?" I ventured. "They're old."

"Nah, still too heavy," he said, pulling a pocketknife out of his jeans.

"Don't mess with those," I protested as he started to pry at the backing. "We've had enough trouble over them."

"Got a delicate touch, they'll never know." He manipulated the knife along the back and pulled the chipboard out at the corner, just enough to peek in. "Well-l-l, that explains it," he said slowly.

I groaned, fearful of what new hex was about to be visited on me.

He moved his head back so I could see inside. The entire cabinet was stuffed with little zip bags of something white and powdery. "Holy Mother," I said. "*What* have we gotten in the middle of?"

"Smack dab in the middle of—no pun intended," Dave answered.

"What should we do? Call the cops?" I asked, my words coming fast and my brain stripping a gear as I tried to consider everything at once.

"You think your garage-sale folks are in on this?" he asked.

"No, not Hank." I flinched. "God, I hope not. I really like the guy. But Alma," I began, then tried for objectivity. "No, not her either. Not that there's anything righteous about her. But why would they have sold it to me if they'd known?"

"Yeah, on the other hand, they're awfully keen on getting it back," Dave said. "But let's say they're innocent as lambs. If we call the cops now, it just comes back on them," Dave said. "How do they prove this was Darnell's? For that matter, how do we prove where *you* got the thing? Got a receipt?"

"Yeah, right," I said. "It was a garage sale, Dave."

He nodded. "That's what I'm saying. Possession's nine-tenths of the law—good and bad."

He stood up and stared at the floor for a moment, working his ever-present chewing gum. "Okay, here's how we're going to do this," he said finally. "Hank will come to pick this thing up. I'll fol-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

low till he passes it off. Once Darnell gets the thing into his hands I'll call a cop buddy of mine and tip him off. That'll give Hank a chance to get clear."

"But what if they don't get Darnell? What if he finds out we've dropped the dime on him?" I said, my voice rising. "He's a scary-lookin' dude, Dave."

"Where you want him?" Dave asked. "Back behind bars, or out on your street following Bliss around, maybe hopped up on what's in there?"

"Good point," I conceded.

Hank was falling all over himself thanking me for getting the stereo back. He counted out the two hundred dollars, the cast making clumsy work of fishing the bills out of his wallet.

"Cheap at the price if it'll get Darnell out of my life," he said, plunking the money down on the counter. "I don't understand the boy. I offered him the same money and he could get a stereo ten times better with it, but he says it's the principle of the thing—like he'd know a principle if he got hit upside the head with it," he muttered.

If Hank was acting, he was good. Or maybe I just wanted to believe him. I helped him carry the stuff to his car. Dave was staying out of sight so he could tail him.

I was not happy to see Alma sitting in the front seat of the old Chrysler. And she was even less thrilled to see me.

"'Bout time," she said. I couldn't tell if she was aiming the words at Hank or at me. I ignored her as Hank thanked me yet again, and offered his good hand. He winced and let out a grunt as he got into the car.

"You okay to drive with that thing?" I asked, pointing to the cast.

"Mind your own damn business," Alma said, just loud enough for me to hear.

But Hank gave me a weary smile. "I'll be okay," he said. "Pain's kicked up again, is all. Doc's going to work me into his schedule this afternoon, see what he can do for me."

I shielded my eyes against the sun and watched them pull away with that stereo in the trunk. It might as well have been ticking.

I eat when I'm nervous and I piled it on at lunch. Then I went out to the alleyway and commenced pacing, cell phone in hand, trying to summon a call from Dave through sheer force of will.

I burned off a burrito and a good part of the double-fudge brownie I'd topped it off with before the call finally came.

"Good news and bad news," Dave said. "Good is, they nabbed Darnell. He's still on probation so they'll violate him. He'll be back in Central Prison before they've had time to reassign his cell."

"And the bad news?" I asked. "Is everybody okay?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Everybody's fine, but it didn't go off exactly like we'd planned it. Somebody else tipped off the cops too. There were two responders. One moved in a little premature and caught Alma up in the bust."

"What about Hank?" I asked.

"He wasn't there. She dropped him off at the doctor's office on her way to meet Darnell. Guess she was in a big hurry to get this thing back to him."

"Damn, she'll have me right in the middle of this mess," I said.

"I don't think so. She's not talking right now," Dave reported. "Her and Darnell got into a fight in the parking lot where she gave him the stuff. He checks it out, then he starts screaming at her that she's ripped him off and where's the rest. She starts screaming back what's he talking about. They were still screeching at each other when all hell broke loose. A squad car came swooping in, lights flashing. A few minutes later my guy comes blasting in. And Alma's still screaming, except now it's that Darnell is a lot of words nice women don't usually shout out loud in a Kroger parking lot. Then she starts waling on one of the cops with her purse strap and they cuff her and put her in the back of the squad car. She does her banshee thing for a few more minutes, then gives one last holler that she wants a lawyer and clams up."

Hank came by the next day to tell me what had happened and I feigned surprise. He assured me that he'd known nothing about Darnell's stash. "I don't have any truck with drugs. Well, not since the 'sixties anyway, and never the hard stuff," he said earnestly. "And I want you to know I don't aim to get you involved in this any more than you've already been. I didn't say nothing to the police about the garage sale. And Alma won't, either, I'll see to it."

I didn't have much faith in his ability to control Alma, but I hoped he could keep her quiet. This was not the kind of publicity my fledgling business needed. I told him I appreciated it and that I was sorry about what had happened to her.

"Yeah, I'm worried about her," he said. "I can't come up with the bail money. We've sold the house and everything's tied up in escrow so I can't borrow against it right now." He shrugged. "And that's the only thing we had worth anything. Don't know how I'm going to pay a lawyer. She's not happy about being in the jailhouse, I can tell you."

I had the fleeting thought that maybe I should offer to give Hank the proceeds of the *Freewheelin'* album to help out, but I got over it quick. If it was Hank himself, maybe. But for Alma—not hardly.

"I know a good lawyer," I told him, grabbing a Post-It note and scribbling down the name and number of a friend I used to do forensic accounting work for back in my CPA days. "He'll work with you on the bill and he's good."

Hank thanked me. He started to leave, but then looked all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

around the store. "All these records," he said, as if enchanted. "And you can listen to 'em any time you want? And you make a living at it? That's a sweet deal!"

I couldn't argue with that. The last couple of weeks notwithstanding, I'm generally content with my life. I hoped now I'd have it back.

Two days later, Bliss's newly *ex*-boyfriend Terrance was arrested trying to sell some of the stuff he'd helped himself to from the speaker cabinets to an undercover cop. Strictly amateur hour.

"That snake," Bliss fumed. "I should have known something was up when he started giving me crap about bringing the speakers back. I'd had to pretty-please him to take them and fix them up in the first place and then I had to go over there and practically steal them back. I should have kicked him to the curb weeks ago."

"Guess that solves the mystery of who called in the other tip," Dave said when we were back in the privacy of my office. "Probably figured if somebody else got arrested with them they couldn't come after him for skimming some off. How is it there's always more horse's asses than there are horses, you ever wonder that?"

Darnell and Terrance each took a plea bargain. Terrance got off light—thirty days, plus probation and community service—and was gentleman enough in the end to keep Bliss out of the whole mess by not letting on that he'd got the drugs he was caught with from the speaker cabinets. But Darnell became a guest of the state for another long stretch wherein he'd doubtless hone his criminal skills for another run at the health and well-being of the unsuspecting citizenry upon his next release.

I'd been anticipating a call from the D.A.'s office or from Alma's attorney, but no one had contacted me. I started to feel guilty about holding out information that might help and finally called Hank.

"How's it going?" I asked when he picked up the phone, sounding more chipper than I might have expected for a man whose wife was in the clinker.

"Oh, could be worse, I guess," Hank said.

"How's Alma holding up?"

"This whole thing's wearing on her," he said. "Her lawyer's trying to get her to take a plea and I think she may go for it."

"Really?" I said. "That surprises me. Randy's usually a fighter. He hardly ever pleads out a criminal case."

"Randy?" Hank said. "Oh yeah, your lawyer friend. Well, no, I didn't call him. I don't like being beholden to people. Alma's got a guy I found in the phone book. He's a nice kid."

"And he wants her to take a plea?" I asked.

"Well, they're offering five to eight years and he thinks that's pretty good, considering."

"Listen, Hank, if it'll help I'll come down and make a state-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment—testify if I have to," I told him. "I could tell them about y'all selling me the stereo and all. She wouldn't have done that if she'd been in on it."

"Well, I thank you for that offer, but they just flat out don't believe Alma about *anything*. They're bound and determined to pin this on her. She's already spilled the beans about selling it to you, but they think she was getting it out of the house so she could tell Darnell somebody else was to blame for what was missing. And after I told them how set she was on getting it back, well, that didn't help, I reckon. Don't know what I was thinking there." He huffed a little laugh.

"So they know I had it?"

"They do, but they don't care," he said airily. "All they care about is, Alma had it and she gave it to Darnell. End of story."

"And how about you? How are you holding up?" I asked.

"Me?" he asked. "Oh, I'm doing good," he said brightly. "Healing nicely."

I could hear R.E.M.'s "It's the End of the World as We Know It" playing in the background. More jangle—the happy sound in sharp juxtaposition to the words.

Sort of like this whole conversation with Hank.

Despite Dave's advice I couldn't leave things alone. It was like a scab I just couldn't resist picking. I'd love to say it was because I couldn't stand the injustice being done to Alma. That I'd risen above my personal animus for the woman to a higher plane of consciousness, but the truth was, I couldn't get too worked up about Alma's plight. The woman was mean as a snake and a cheat to boot. She was on her own.

What was bugging me was that there was something off kilter about this whole thing and I couldn't figure out what. I kept thinking back to the day of the garage sale and getting a weird vibe. I told Dave as much that night after my strange conversation with Hank. Tenpenny and I were closing up and Dave was pacing, popping his knuckles and his gum, waiting for me to finish so we could go grab a burger.

"Was there music?" he asked. "That always works for you."

"No," I said. "Wait, yes. Well, part of the time. Something country. But I don't remember what it was."

"What do you remember about it?" he asked.

"I don't know," I answered. "One of the hat guys. Something about—oh, what was it?—the sun coming up . . . no, sunset. Yeah, that was it."

"Kenny Chesney," Tenpenny said without looking up from counting out the register. He lifted his black Stetson and ran his hand through his hair—tonight's band was alt-country. "Good song. 'When the Sun Goes Down.' Duet with Uncle Kracker."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We got it?" Dave asked.

Tenpenny settled the hat back on his head and nodded in the direction of the used CD section. "Think there's a copy over there," he said, placing a stack of bills into a bank pouch and slamming the drawer.

Dave found the CD and put it in the player. "Sit," he commanded, pulling up a chair for me.

I closed my eyes and listened. Songs I don't already know don't work quite as well, but as I relaxed into it the scene started to replay in my head. I listened to it a second time just to be sure, and there it was. Yeah, I'd need to talk to Hank again.

I called him and he came in the next afternoon looking positively dapper. The cast was gone, his face had healed, and he had a spring in his step. Alma, he told me, had taken the plea and been moved over to the Women's Correctional Center to serve out her sentence.

"They say she'll be out in five, maybe sooner with good behavior." He turned toward the bins of records and I heard him mumble, "Slim chance of *that.*" He picked up a record from the bin. "Otis Redding, *Live in Europe.* I had this one," he said, laughing as if he'd run into an old friend. "Great album."

"Hank, there's something I wanted to ask you about the day of the garage sale," I said.

"What's that?" Hank asked distractedly, traveling along the record bins and flipping through them with a hungry look I recognized all too well.

"When I told you to box up the stereo for me, Alma asked you a question," I said, watching him closely.

"She did?" Hank said, plucking another record from the bin. "Isaac Hayes!" he exclaimed. "*Hot Buttered Soul.* Damn, that man's got a set of pipes! I gotta get this."

"She asked you, 'Is that your old one?'" I said. "She meant was that *your* old stereo, right? But you told me she was the one who insisted on putting *Darnell's* stereo out for the sale and that you couldn't stop her."

"She meant the turntable," he said.

"No, she didn't," I said evenly. "You hadn't even brought that to her. She was looking at the stereo when she asked you that."

Hank stared at me for a long moment, then put the record on the counter and tapped it. "Eight bucks," he said. "You know, since I came in here that first day I've been studying up on this collectible vinyl business. Who'd have believed it, these old records being worth this kind of money?"

"You told her yes," I went on, moving my head around to try to force him to look me in the face. "You knew, didn't you? You set her and Darnell up. You're the one who called in the tip. Your doctor's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

appointment that day wasn't scheduled. You arranged it to get out of going along to meet up with Darnell, then you called the cops."

Hank pressed his lips hard together and bent his head to the side, letting out a gigantic sigh. "Look, I'm sorry I got you into all this. You're a good person. And you've got a good memory. But let me tell you what I remember. I remember getting the living daylights beat out of me—and my wife taking sides with the one who did it. And it wasn't the first time her and that low-life family of hers put me in the middle of a mess."

"Did she know?" I asked.

"About what was in the speakers?" Hank said, shaking his head. "No. I didn't either till just before Darnell got out. I never thought he'd make parole, but then he did and I didn't want him getting hold of that stuff. I had to get it out of our house somehow. But I was afraid to tell Alma. Tell you the truth, I guess I didn't want to find out just how low she'd go for money."

I remained silent and Hank rushed on. "Think what you want of me, I'm not sorry. Only regret I have is getting you crossways of it. I was figuring on getting it back from you quiet-like and getting Darnell stung with it, but Alma overheard me on the phone getting your name and address and got all steamed up, threatening to tell Darnell where to find you. I got a little desperate."

"The break-in here?" I asked.

Hank shrugged. "I didn't take anything, or break anything. I just wanted to make sure you'd *want* to be rid of the thing. I didn't want you or some other innocent to get caught with it."

"Well, thanks for that—I think," I said.

"The whole mess is a shame. But what are you gonna do?" he said. He counted out the money for the Issac Hayes. "I guess if you're me, you go sit in your condo and put *Hot Buttered Soul* on your new turntable and turn it up as loud as you damn well please and try to enjoy what's left of your life." He gave me a penetrating gaze.

"Hank," I began uncertainly.

He picked up the bag I'd put the record in and held up a hand. "You do what you gotta do," he said. "But as far as I'm concerned, everything is just as it should be and this conversation never happened. And again, I really am sorry for the trouble I caused you."

He walked toward the door, then stopped and turned, giving me a sly smile. "'Course, I imagine that *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* is worth a *little* aggravation," he said.

My eyes went wide and we were locked in a stare for what seemed a long moment before we both burst out laughing.

"Told you I've been studying up," he said. "How much you get for it?"

"Still got it. Bidding's up to seven thousand," I said.

"Worth every cent," he said, and went out the door whistling *Play a song for me, in the jingle-jangle morning . . .* ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The People in the Flat Across the Road

by Natasha Cooper

It had been a ghastly day. I'd decided to work at home so I could finish the proposal for our biggest client's new campaign. The copy was urgent, you see, because they'd pulled back the meeting by three days. My boss and I were due to make the presentation at ten next morning, and the designers were waiting in the office to pretty up my text and sort out all the PowerPoint stuff for us.

The trouble was, I hadn't expected the interruptions: far more at home than in any office; and worse because of having no receptionists or secretaries to fend them off.

First it was the postman. Not my usual bloke but a temp who couldn't tell the difference between 16 Holly Road, where I live, and 16 Oak Court, Holly Road, which is a flat just opposite. Even so, I shouldn't have shouted. It wasn't *his* fault he couldn't read much; or speak English, either.

And he wasn't to know how many hours I've wasted over the past year redirecting all the mail I get that obviously isn't meant for me. Letters and packages with all sorts of names. I never pay much attention to the names once I've seen they're not mine, so I couldn't tell you what they were now.

I opened one parcel by mistake, not having read the label before I ripped off the brown packing tape. Wondering why someone was sending me a whole bunch of phone adapters and wires and stuff, I turned the package over and saw it was meant for the flat. That

Natasha Cooper—a.k.a. Daphne Wright, Kate Hatfield, Clare Layton—is the author of twenty-four novels and numerous short stories. She worked in publishing in Britain for ten years before becoming a full-time writer in the early nineties. Her latest novel to see print in the U.S. is *Evil Is Done* (British title: *A Greater Evil*), another in her barrister Trish Maguire series, from St. Martin's Minotaur.

©2007 by Natasha Cooper

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was when I crossed the road and made my third attempt to introduce myself and sort it out. The funny thing was, you see, that in all the months I'd been dealing with their mail I'd never actually seen any of them. Once or twice, there'd been a hand coming through the net curtains to open or shut a window, but that was all.

As usual, I got no answer, even though all the lights were on and there was a radio or TV blaring. I thought I heard their footsteps this time too, and voices, but I suppose it could have been imagination.

Anyway, I was so cross they couldn't be bothered to do their neighbourly bit that I stopped bothering to take their mail across the road. I didn't even correct the wrongly addressed stuff (some of the senders missed out the Oak Court bit too; it wasn't only the postmen who got it wrong). Instead I'd scrawl "Not Known Here" or "No one of this name at this address" on the packages and envelopes before stuffing them back into the postbox on my way to work. If the packages were too big, which happened occasionally, I'd stomp round to the post office on Saturday mornings and dump them at the end of the counter. It took much longer than carting them across the road and leaving them on the flat's doorstep, but it was way more satisfying.

Which maybe explains—though of course it doesn't excuse—the way I shouted at the poor stand-in postie this time round. He took three steps backwards and muttered some kind of apology, so of course I had to join in and explain I hadn't meant to yell.

Anyway, he was only the first. When it wasn't people collecting for charity—decent, kind, clean, well-spoken people, who didn't deserve to be glared at and sent away empty-handed—it was miserable, hopeless-looking young men trying to sell me ludicrously expensive low-grade dusters I didn't want. Or Jehovah's Witnesses. How was I supposed to flog my brain into producing light-hearted, witty sales copy with all this going on? I was ripe for murder, I can tell you.

And then there was the small man in decorator's overalls who had the cheek to ring my bell and tell me my neighbours had been complaining about my overhanging hedge. He offered to cut it back and take away the debris for some even more ludicrous sum. He got all the insults I'd been choking down all morning, and no apology, and I still think I was justified. Almost. At least I didn't lay a hand on him.

When I'd slammed the door in his face, I went back to my copy and re-read the pathetically little I'd managed to write. I had to delete the whole lot. You can imagine how I felt. I bolted some yogurt for lunch and spilled most of it down my T-shirt, so I had to change that and fling it in the washing machine, which wasted yet more time.

Then it was the end of the school day and there were shrieks from all the little darlings who'd been pent up in their classrooms for too long, and the exasperating heavy *slap-slap* of a football being kicked up and down the road. And chat from the little dar-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lings' attending adults, who all seemed to want to stand right outside my front windows, either talking to each other or jabbering into their mobiles.

When they'd all gone and the street was blessedly quiet once more, the doorbell went again. I shrieked out some filthy word or other (actually, I know quite well what it was, but I don't want to shock you) and ran to the door, wrenching it open and snarling, only to see my ten-year-old godson, looking absolutely terrified.

I apologised again, of course, and discovered he'd only come to return the tin in which I'd delivered his birthday cake. He's great, and on normal days I enjoy his company. He has an interesting, offbeat take on the world, and his talk of school and sports and music often gives me ideas I can use for work when we're pushing children's products. So I had to ask him in and offer him some Diet Coke, which was the only suitable thing I had in the house. Still looking scared, he shook his head and scuttled away like Hansel escaping from the wicked witch's gingerbread house.

I managed a quiet hour after that, and I had about twenty-five percent of the copy written when the early evening crowd started: the meter readers, more charity-collectors, and then the party canvassers. Apparently we were going to have a by-election the next week. I eventually got down to real work at about eight, which was the time I'd have got back from the office on an ordinary day. I was spitting.

Still, I got the copy finished in the end—and it had just the right edgy but funny tone for the product. I was pretty sure the clients would like it. But when I saw it was half eleven, I knew the poor designers weren't going to be happy. I'd kept them hanging on for hours. I hoped they wouldn't be so angry they screwed up. We needed the presentation to *look* brilliant as well as sound it.

So I e-mailed my text to them with a genuine apology, and asked them to get it back to me by eight the next morning with all the pix and whatever stylish tarting-up they could manage. Then I copied everything to my boss, with an e-mail to say I'd meet him at the clients' at nine forty-five. That would give me plenty of time to have the crucial six hours' sleep and get my hair sorted and pick the best clothes to say it all: cool; monied; efficient; sexy.

As you can imagine, I was pretty hyper by this time, so I took a couple of sleeping pills. Only over-the-counter herbal stuff. I think they're mainly lettuce, and the label on the packet always makes me laugh: "Warning: May Cause Drowsiness."

I was calming down a bit. I chased the pills with a glass of wine and a bit of bread and cream cheese with a smear of mango chutney, which reminds me of the sandwiches my mother used to make me when I was ill as a child.

So, fed, wined, and drugged to the eyeballs with lettuce, I took myself to bed. Just to be sure, I opened *The Unbearable Lightness*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Being, which hardly ever fails to send me to sleep. It did its stuff pretty soon. I ripped off my specs and turned out the light, to find myself in that state where you fall hundreds of feet through the air, while still being plastered to the mattress. Heaven, really.

Through the lovely muzzy feeling, I thought I heard the phone ring once or twice. I ignored it and it stopped long before the answering machine could've cut in.

The next thing I knew I was floating on twinkling turquoise waves in warm sunlight with dolphins leaping in the distance and a raucous London voice yelling, "Go, Go, Go." I'd barely got my eyes open when there was this almighty crash downstairs and thundering feet and cracking wood as my bedroom door burst open, spraying splinters and bits of the lock all over the place. I got chips of wood in my hair and all over my face.

I'd always been a coward. But I'd never been afraid before. Not like this.

I couldn't breathe. It was as if I'd been hit in the throat. My heart was banging like a pneumatic drill. And I thought I'd throw up any minute. Or pee in my bed.

The worst of it was I couldn't see anything much. There seemed to be dozens of sturdy thighs in jeans at eye level and stubby black things that looked like gun barrels.

It seemed mad. But it's what they looked like. All I could hear was panting: heavy, angry panting. Whatever they were going to do, I knew I had to be able to see, so I reached for the specs on my bedside table. A voice yelled at me to f—ing stay where I was and not move. I couldn't. I mean, my arm was way too heavy. It crashed down on the table and knocked the specs to the floor with the lamp and my book. It made them jam one of the black things nearer my face and yell at me to stay still.

It really was a gun.

Then a hand came and grabbed the edge of the duvet. I hadn't got anything on under it, but that didn't strike me until they ripped the duvet off me and let the cold air in. I twitched. I couldn't help it, in spite of the guns. But nothing happened. Except that one of them swore. I don't know what he thought he'd see under my duvet except me.

"What?" said one of the others. He moved his head a bit. At least, I think it was his head. All I could see was a kind of furry pink mass where his face must be. He raised his voice: "What've *you* got?"

"Nothing," called another man from further away. "There's no one else. Only a kind of study, with a computer and filing cabinets and magazines and things."

"Magazines? What magazines?"

"Women's stuff. *Cosmo. Vogue.* Things like that."

He came closer and bent right down into my face. That's when I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

saw he had a dark-blue peaked cap with a chequered headband and POLICE in neat white letters.

I began to breathe again.

"God, you scared me," I said, and my voice was all high and quavery. I tried to toughen it. "Can I have my glasses, please? And a dressing gown?"

"Don't move." Three gun barrels came even closer to my face. And I heard the scrunch of glass. I don't suppose they did it deliberately, but one of them mashed my new Armani specs under his heavy great feet.

That was enough to make me more cross than scared. Or maybe it was reaction. Shock or something. Anyway, whatever it was, I forgot their guns and not having any clothes on and I just yelled at them, in a voice even my grandmother would have admired. And no one was grander than my grandmother.

"Stop being so damned silly. You've got the wrong sodding address, like the sodding postman. You want the people in the flat across the road. Now let me get up and get my dressing gown. And stop playing silly buggers with those *idiotic* guns."

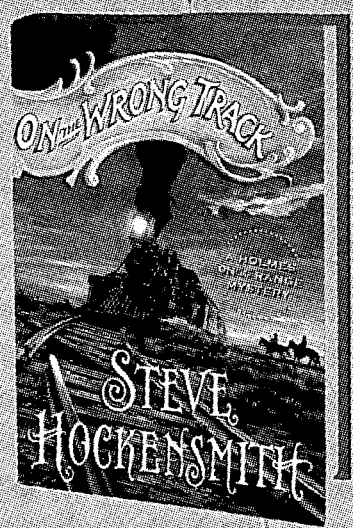
The nearest man took a step back and I knew I'd won. After a bit, another of them handed me my dressing gown, smiling and nodding in a sloppy apologetic kind of way, like a bashful terrier. A minute ago he'd been holding a gun to my face; now he wanted to be friends? Mad. ●

OLD RED AND BIG RED RIDE AGAIN!

★

The hilarious follow-up to the universally-acclaimed *Holmes on the Range* featuring the Sherlock Holmes-lovin' sleuths.

"Crackling pace, lots of humor, and appealing Wild West flavor."
—Kirkus Reviews



Available wherever books are sold ★ www.stevehockensmith.com

MINOTAUR

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Boy Inside the Man

by Sarah Weinman

This particular Saturday morning, Dovid Birnbaum woke up a little earlier than usual. It was a special day. *Today, you are a man,* said the voices of his mother, his rabbi, and his teachers. Other kids might have laughed it off, figuring correctly that there wasn't much different about the day before and the day after. Thirteen was still thirteen.

But Dovid knew different. Today, he really was a man. Today would change his life.

He checked the clock. Was seven-thirty too early to put on his *tefillin* for the first time? He decided to do so anyway, carefully affixing the phylacteries as his rabbi had taught him, placing the boxes on his forearms and forehead and wrapping the strands round and round before tying them in knots. Dovid wondered if he'd done it right, but when he looked in the mirror, at the image reflected back, everything seemed to be okay. And it didn't really matter if he'd screwed something up. He was a man now; he could afford to make a mistake.

He kept an eye on the door as he went through the prayers, hoping there wouldn't be a knock on it. There always was this time of morning, and he dreaded it. His mother would be on the other side, ordering him to get up to go to school or do some sort of chore or favor or something. Dovid always wanted to be left alone. Always. But this time he got his wish. There was no knock. It definitely was a special day.

Dovid put his *tefillin* away, but the feeling of unease stayed with him. Normally if he had time to sleep in he'd read his comic books or play video games. But today was *Shabbos,* so no PS2 for him, and the comic books seemed suddenly unimportant. He had to focus. *Today I am a man,* he repeated to himself over and over, like a mantra. The more he did so, the more he believed it.

Sarah Weinman is crime-fiction columnist for the *Baltimore Sun* and proprietor of the blog "Confessions of an Idiosyncratic Mind" (www.sarahweinman.com). In 2006, her short stories appeared in the anthologies *Dublin Noir* and *Baltimore Noir* from Akashic Books, in the anthology *Damn Near Dead* from Busted Flush Press, and in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.* †

©2007 by Sarah Weinman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eventually the clock struck eight, then eight-thirty, and Dovid couldn't procrastinate anymore. He had to get dressed, put on the special suit that had been a gift from his great-aunt Shelley on his mother's side. "Wear it well," she'd said, "it belonged to your grandfather."

He didn't have to ask which one. Shelley worshipped her late brother, whom she kvelled about constantly for being the "former president of the RCA!" She refused to accept that he was anything less than a saint, and especially pooh-poohed any disparaging comments from Dovid's mother. But then Great-Aunt Shelley disparaged almost anything Dovid's mother said. When he was younger he'd hated that, but now he understood.

The suit was a bit long and a bit baggy, but it had been meant for a man at least three inches taller than Dovid was now. The first time he'd tried it on, he wondered if he was also trying on his grandfather's personality, or his ghost. When he'd told his mother, she'd gone pale. "Don't utter such a thing," she'd snapped, "especially when it's for a *simcha.*" After that, the suit had hung in Dovid's closet, almost forlornly. He'd finally pulled it out last night and was only mildly surprised to feel nothing. No ghost, no memories, just emptiness.

It would make things a whole lot easier.

Dovid dressed quickly, forgoing his usual shower because of the Sabbath. He examined himself in the mirror again and winced. Barely five foot four, with knobby knees that curved inward and unruly red hair that grew outward, Afro-style, he didn't look like any man he knew. He barely looked like the other kids who had been bar-mitzvahed this year, the ones he had been forced to invite because they had been forced to invite him to theirs. And as the youngest in his class, Dovid's bar mitzvah was the last one in the merry-go-round that was *simcha* season. He knew he wasn't the only one glad to see the whole business come to an end.

He checked himself one more time. The suit was on, the *tzitzis* were carefully affixed underneath, and his black shoes gleamed with the polish he'd given them the previous evening. There was only one last thing to put on, and he retrieved it from his underwear drawer. The good-luck charm. It had belonged to his grandfather, the one Great-Aunt Shelley had worshiped so much. He'd found it in the attic a few weeks ago when he was rummaging around for some comic books to read, and as soon as he saw it lying there, Dovid knew two things: It had to be his, and he had to make sure his mother didn't know he had it.

He'd worn it ever since, to school, to his bar-mitzvah lessons, even to *shul.* It gave him comfort and security, and today he needed it more than ever. Already he could feel his nerves calming down. It would make a special day even better.

Now he was ready.

When he ventured downstairs his mother was already at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kitchen table, eating more quickly than usual. She turned around at his approaching footsteps.

"Dovid, you're ready!" The strong tone she began with trailed off. Her eyes darted everywhere, left and right, but never on his face.

He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. They both knew each was a disappointment to the other. In looks and demeanor, Dovid resembled his late father, whom others said was a "no-good bum" when they thought he wasn't listening. And until last night, Dovid would have done anything for his mother. She was his world, especially as there was so little family left. Only twenty relatives would be at the bar mitzvah. All from his mother's side.

She opened her mouth, probably to apologize, then seemed to think better of it. He silently thanked God not to have to hear her say she was sorry. It would be fake and hollow and would ruin his special day. Instead, she pasted on a smile and asked him what he wanted for breakfast.

"Nothing," he said gravely, thinking it would make him sound more like a man. "*Shul* starts at nine and we shouldn't be late."

His mother drew back, startled, before regaining her composure. "You're right," she said, "I guess you should have knocked on my door this time."

But they both knew that would have been a terrible idea. Then Dovid would have had to see what was on the other side.

His mother finished her breakfast and they began the walk to *shul*. It only took five minutes and usually felt shorter, but this time every step seemed to take an eternity. Dovid's mother turned to him expectantly. She couldn't be apologizing, not now. It wouldn't be fair.

"I hope you're not too nervous. Your speech will go just fine," she said.

He relaxed slightly, confidence returning. "I feel pretty good about it."

"You should, Dovid. I'm—"

"Don't say it, Mother. Please."

He'd never seen her expression so bleak. "I never meant to hurt you," she said quietly, as if each word stabbed her.

Involuntarily Dovid reached to his left side, holding on to his good-luck charm. Was he ever glad he had it, this day more than ever.

At the *shul*'s entrance, the security guard bowed to him and his mother. "That's a good bar-mitzvah boy," the guard said. At any other time, those words would have struck Dovid as being funny, as the guard wasn't Jewish and said it wrong. This time Dovid wondered why a security guard wasn't checking them out. It would be so easy to pass something through.

A hand clapped him on the back. "Dovid, you ready?"

He turned around and froze. Rabbi Drexler was grinning at him, trying too hard and bending too far backward. Dovid bit back the urge to return the back-clapping, or even better, slap the man's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

face. But he couldn't. The man was still a rabbi. His rabbi. And though he felt no respect, he had to put it on.

"I'm ready for anything," Dovid said.

"Good, good." If Rabbi Drexler caught Dovid's tone he decided to ignore it. "The speech will be, too."

Dovid's brain said thanks, but he did not. He had to make one concession to anger.

He thought he'd remember every detail of the *davening* but was surprised to find it all went in a blur. He wasn't nervous when he went up to the *bimah,* and only stumbled once as he read through his entire Torah portion. He was so focused on the speech, on what he would say, that he passed through the Haftarah almost on autopilot and barely felt the blows to his head and body due to the hard candies thrown by the congregation.

A few prayers and many mazel-tovs later, it was time. One butterfly at a time had begun to occupy his stomach and now he had an entire symphony of queasiness. Dovid swallowed. He would be fine. He knew it. He had to be.

This was too important to screw up.

He stood up and surveyed the congregation. The seating was separate, so his mother sat in the front row of the women's section with his great-aunt Shelley on one side and her sister Pearl on the other. The other two women beamed. His mother did not. Could she have some inkling of what would happen? Dovid didn't think so. He'd made sure to hide his intentions.

The rabbi sat next to the ark. He seemed lost in thought, or at least that's how Dovid interpreted it. Then, and only then, did he allow himself to smile. It was good to see the man squirm.

Dovid took a deep breath and began. This week's Torah portion was *Yitro,* and he'd originally decided to talk about respecting your elders and what that entailed. He'd given a brief thought to changing his speech entirely but he wasn't very good at winging it. The end would require enough improvisation, and he had to concentrate on getting that right.

He could sense the congregation's approval and his mother's surprise. So she thought he didn't respect her anymore, and she was right to think so. He couldn't get a good look at the rabbi but found he didn't want to. He was close to the end.

Before he got there, Dovid gave the crowd one final glance. His mother's expression was pure fear. Now she knew he was up to something, but he couldn't let that dissuade him.

"I guess now it's time for the thank-yous. First I'd like to thank my great-aunt Shelley, who has been an inspiration to me. My aunt Pearl was a great help. I'd also like to thank Rabbi Drexler, as well as my mother, for teaching me a very important principle: Do as I say, not as I do."

He heard the crowd gasp but the adrenalin was pumping too

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

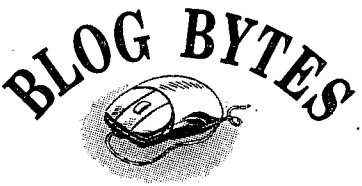
hard. He'd come to the end and he had to get this right.

"Finally, I'd like to honor the memory of my father, Leonard, and all of my grandparents. Without you, I would not be here, to have this special day of becoming a man. And to my grandfather Morris, I give a special thank-you for the gift you left behind. I know you couldn't be around to give it to me personally, but I hope you'll understand why I had to use it."

It was a swift, smooth motion to retrieve the good-luck charm. The gasps grew louder but all Dovid felt was the charm's lightness and how utterly right it seemed in his right hand. He raised it upwards, barely registering the rush of several people toward him. But they wouldn't get there in time.

When it was over, Dovid smiled. His boyhood was over and he had finally become a man.

No matter what, he would stay that way forever. ●



by Ed Gorman

The Rap Sheet. J. Kingston Pierce offers his readers high style, sharp insights, and an air of amiable conversation as he looks at mystery novels, mystery movies, mystery TV shows, and other subjects ranging from the new batch of Bond babes to a moving tribute to the late Jack Palance. Part pure journalism, part critique, and part just plain fun, The Rap Sheet is a tribute to the intelligence and wit of a single person. Pierce gives opinionating a good name. **http://therapsheet.blogspot.com**

gadetection: "A comprehensive collection of material relating to the Golden Age of Detection—roughly from 1920 to 1960—covering authors, books, magazines, ephemera, and other details." While the Golden Age doesn't hold great interest for me, I spent a pleasant hour and a half on this site getting up to speed on this special era of mystery fiction. And you know what? I'm going to buy a few of the books recommended here. I sorta got hooked. This is a formidable, readable site that covers its time period in a fascinating way. **http://gadetection.pbwiki.com** *(continued page 143)*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLARA'S SACRIFICE

by J. F. Freedman

The Blue Dolphin is strictly a locals bar, because it's too far off the beaten track for the tourist trade. It's tucked away on a dead-end street in the West Beach section of the paradise known as Santa Barbara, a couple of blocks up from Cabrillo Boulevard, which parallels the ocean, and an equal number of blocks off State Street, the city's main north-south artery. It's a no-froufrou joint, just drinking, watching sports on the overhead televisions, and drinking.

Two or three times a week, Sutpen and I meet there after work. We slam down enough booze to get decently into the bag, but not so much that we're blotto. We are, after all, professionals.

It's the middle of June, so the sun is still high when I push through the door. The oldies radio station is playing Duane Eddy's instrumental of "Gidget Goes Hawaiian." Sutpen is sitting at the bar, nursing his usual Absolut martini. As my eyes adjust to the dim light I nod at Emily, the bartender from God knows how far back. She begins putting together my perfect Manhattan: Maker's Mark bourbon, up, no cherry. I plunk down on the stool next to Sutpen's. It's a weekday, so the place is pretty slow. Just us and a handful of other regulars.

Sutpen and I have a couple of fundamental qualities in common. We're both functioning alcoholics, and we're both sleeping with his wife. Clara, a willowy blonde who could pass for Diane Lane's sister (in other words, she's a stunner), turned forty six months ago. Sutpen was going to do the usual wine-and-dine at a good restaurant, a nice evening but nothing ground-breaking, with maybe a

Thriller writer J. F. Freedman, several of whose books have been *New York Times* best-sellers, began his writing career in film and TV, where he wrote and directed episodes of such shows as *The X-Files* and *Kojak*. In 1992 his first novel, *Against the Wind*, was published and its success made novel-writing his primary occupation. His latest book is *A Killing in the Valley* (Madison Park Press, 2006).

©2007 by J. F. Freedman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

modest Beverly Hills shopping trip thrown in for brownie points, but at the last minute he had to fly down to San Diego for an unavoidable meeting with a megabucks client; so Clara, to spite him, celebrated her birthday (a biggie, especially for a woman) by spending the weekend with his oldest and closest friend at a cabin I rent up in the Los Padres National Forest. We had been lusting after each other for years (not particularly subtly, but comically enough not to arouse suspicion), and this seemed like the right occasion to go for it. Sometimes inevitability overtakes conscience.

It was going to be a one-time, get-it-out-of-your-system stand, but we both liked it way too much. If Sutpen wasn't one of my best friends going all the way back to college, or if they really did have an unhappy marriage, I wouldn't have felt as guilty about cuckolding him as I did, and am. But the cock knows what it knows, to paraphrase Woody Allen. It's a crappy thing to do, but I can't keep away from her, nor she from me. We're not going to fall in love, she's not going to leave her husband so we can run away together and start a new life, like Gauguin in Tahiti. We're just going to carry on our under-the-radar illicit affair until it runs out of steam or Sutpen dies of cirrhosis, whichever comes first.

"What's up?" I say in salutation.

Sutpen lights a Camel filter. Smoking in public establishments is illegal in California but the news hasn't hit the Blue Dolphin yet, not that anybody in here would give a damn. He inhales a lungful of smoke, blows a practiced smoke ring towards the pressed-tin ceiling, and takes a healthy swig from his martini. He has a head start on me; this must be at least his second. You know a guy for over twenty years, you can spot important stuff like that.

Emily slides a cocktail napkin in front of me and places my drink on it. As I'm about to lift it to my lips, Sutpen turns to me.

"Clara's cheating on me."

Thank God I hadn't taken a sip yet. I might have choked, or blown a mouthful of drink across the bar. I lean over and sip the top off my drink; I don't trust myself to pick the glass up.

"How do you know?" I ask. "Are you sure?" I add, trying to sound concerned and brotherly.

"I just do." He knocks down half his drink in one swallow.

"You caught her?"

"No." He pauses, staring darkly into his glass. "Not yet. But I'm going to, pretty damn soon. I've got Bonnie Walsh working on it."

Bonnie Walsh is a private investigator. She's the best in the county. Sutpen uses her when he absolutely has to get the goods.

"How long have you . . ." I almost say "known," but amend it to "suspected this?"

"Not long. Couple of weeks." He corrects me. "Not *suspected,* Kevin. A husband *knows.* It might take him awhile, but sooner or later he's going to figure it out."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Any idea who it is?" asks the supportive friend, there in time of need.

He finishes his drink and holds it up for a refill. "You think I'd be sitting here calmly having a drink with my best buddy and pal if I knew who it is?" He shakes his head. "Bonnie hasn't scoped that out yet. But she will." He flicks some ash off his cigarette onto the floor. "She's like the Texas Rangers, she always gets her man."

I lift my drink to my lips. My hand is just steady enough now that I don't spill it all over myself. This is going to be a four-drink evening, minimum.

"So how long has Bonnie been on the job?"

"A week."

My mind goes into overdrive. When was the last time Clara and I got together? It's been several days, because I've been busy at work, and she had some conflicts with time as well. I think it's been right around a week since the last time we tried to kill each other with passion. *La petite mort*—the little death. That expression is suddenly becoming too close to the bone.

"So you don't actually have a suspect yet?" I double-check.

Sutpen shakes his head. "Not yet. But it's just a matter of time. It always is. People know they're screwing up and they do it anyway, they can't help themselves," he tells me philosophically, as if he's talking about someone else's disaster, rather than his own.

Emily puts a fresh drink in front of him and he sips from it, this time more slowly. Confessing to a friend is calming him down. "Thus has it ever been, going back to Adam," he lectures me. "Take it from the expert's lips."

Sutpen should know. In a city full of top-drawer divorce lawyers, he's the king. This is a very rich little city. He's handled divorce settlements involving hundreds of millions of dollars. When marriages fall apart, last month's lovers morph into this month's warriors. Divorce is never a pretty affair, but somebody has to do the dirty work, and get paid handsomely for it. Sutpen is one of those elite somebodies.

Who never thought the hammer would crash down on him. The denouement won't be a divorce, necessarily: that will be his decision once the dust clears and the blood is washed clean. What's really bugging him is that he's discovered that his feet are clay, like the rest of mankind's. If I wasn't the cause of Sutpen's misery, I'd feel sorry for him. Actually, I do; but not enough to confess. No friendship goes that deep.

"Does Clara know?" I need to pry as much information out of him as I can, while I can.

He looks at me like I'm the village idiot. "That I'm onto her? Are you crazy? She's the last one who's going to know."

Wrong, I think to myself. She's going to know that he knows in a couple of hours, when I call her and drop the bomb.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The good news, if this can be called *good,* is that we're a step ahead of him. Maybe, if Clara and I can restrain ourselves, the well his detective is drilling will come up dry. Of course, as Sutpen so astutely pointed out, people like her and me, meaning just about everybody in the world, can't hold off. The gravity of passion is almost always too strong.

I should leave this alone, but I can't help myself. "So if you do find out who it is—"

"When," he interrupts me.

"When you do find out, what're you going to do about it? Are you going to divorce Clara?"

He shakes his head vigorously. "Of course not. She's my wife. I love her."

"Then what?"

"Kill the bastard, of course."

This time I almost do blow a mouthful of bourbon. *"Kill him?"* I repeat stupidly. This is not some biker on steroids spouting beer-fueled threats. Drunk or sober (he hasn't ingested enough booze yet to be drunk), Sutpen is a pillar of the community. Men in his position don't commit murder, not over adultery. But who knows how deeply into rage one can go until it's actually in your face? Could Sutpen pull a gun on me and squeeze the trigger? I can't believe he would, but I sure don't ever want to find out.

"Yes," he says calmly. "I'll find them in flagrante delicto and I'll blow the sucker's brains out." He looks at me with this goofy grin on his face. "And I'll walk, Kevin. Scot-free. You think any jury in this county would convict me?" He waves that notion off like he's batting away a mosquito. "It'll never even come to that. Can you imagine Burt Carmichael even bringing me up on charges?"

That he would skate a murder rap is not wishful thinking on my crazed friend's part. Sutpen comes from one of the richest and most powerful families in the county. He makes over a million dollars a year as a divorce lawyer, but if he didn't want to work a lick he wouldn't have to. His grandfather, old Henry Sutpen, was a member of Reagan's original kitchen cabinet. No one in the world is bulletproof, but in this county the Sutpens come pretty damn close. Plus, Burt Carmichael, the district attorney, is one of Sutpen's closest friends; probably second only to me. Burt and Sutpen were law-school classmates at Stanford. They almost went into practice together, until Burt decided to go into criminal law and joined the D.A.'s office. He's in his second term now, and he's almost as untouchable as Sutpen. But not as. No one is.

"I guess that depends," I answer, once I untangle my brain, "on the circumstances."

He laughs. "The circumstances won't be a problem," he assures me, giving me a brotherly rap on the shoulder with his knuckles. "You just watch."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

I'm in my house less than five minutes when my cell phone rings. "Sutpen knows!" Clara practically screams at me over the line. His given name is Barclay, but everyone, even his parents and wife, calls him Sutpen.

I sit down with a heavy thump. "He knows about us?" I stutter. Damn! Was he messing with my head at the Blue Dolphin, to see if I'd crack before he broke it open? What a cagey bastard. No wonder he wins all those trials.

"He knows that I'm cheating on him behind his back. He doesn't know it's you." Her voice is shaking.

My heart is pounding in my chest like the tympani in the "Hallelujah Chorus." I have the sinking feeling I'm going to need some divine intervention to save my ass before this is over.

"How do you know that he knows?" I ask her. "And that he doesn't know it's me?"

She answers my second question first. "If he was sure it was you, you'd be dead by now," she barks at me. "A few years ago, when we were going at each other's throats over some imagined indiscretion, he swore to me that if he ever found out I had betrayed him he'd kill whoever it was, no matter who. He'd kill his own father if it came to that. He meant it, too. He's a victim of his ego and his reputation," she says, as if that aspect of his character somehow excuses him. "As to how I know he's hip to us, Bonnie Walsh is spying on me. His private investigator, the Terminator of all private dicks. I sniffed her out today, the bitch. I've got a sixth sense for this stuff, I've absorbed it over the years from Sutpen, like osmosis. There's no other reason she'd be on my case—it's got to be us." I can hear her ragged, heavy breathing over the line, and I realize she's choking back tears.

"Where is he now?" I ask in a sudden panic. "Is he home yet? Could he be listening in on you?"

"He's outside in the hot tub, soaking like a lobster. He was pretty snockered. You guys must have really tied one on tonight, more than usual. What was the occasion this time?"

"He was baring his soul to me. About his wife's betrayal. And how he had sicced Bonnie on you," I add lamely.

"He *told* you that?" she explodes. "Sonofabitch, Kevin! When were you going to get around to telling *me?* Damn," she spits out. "At least now I know I'm not paranoid."

"Of course I was going to tell you," I try to placate her. "I just walked in the door. I didn't want to call you if he was right there." Phone in hand, I cross the room to my liquor cabinet, pull out a bottle of Gentleman Jack, and pour a healthy shot, which I knock back immediately.

There is a pause. "Yeah, that was smart," she has to concede. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

can feel her calming down—a little. "What are we going to do, Kevin?"

She wants me to solve this. Without her getting permanently damaged, without her marriage crashing on the rocks. She won't say it, but if someone has to take the fall, she wants it to be me, not her.

"Stay away from each other except in public, for openers," I tell her.

"It's not going to be easy. You know that as well as I do."

We were supposed to be together tomorrow, our first assignation in over a week (in hindsight, thank God for not having been able to earlier). I've already booked the motel room, thirty miles away. Under a fake name, of course. I pay cash and no one needs be the wiser. Except if Bonnie Walsh is shadowing Clara we'll be found out immediately, and that'll be all she wrote.

"No, it won't be easy," I admit. "But the alternative . . ." I can't fudge this. This is a life-and-death issue, maybe literally. "There is no alternative, Clara, not for right now. We're going to have to bide our time, you're going to have to be as clean as Caesar's wife, and we'll try to figure out an answer, if there is one." I catch myself, and amend my blunder before she freaks out. "Of course there's an answer—there always is. I meant, one that leaves everybody . . ." I want to say *happy*. I settle for "unbroken."

It's been three days since Sutpen dropped his first shoe. He and I haven't spoken since, except for a quick confirmation over the phone earlier this afternoon that we're doing our usual thing tonight. It would take more than the possible disintegration of his marriage, compounded by the humiliation of horns growing out of his skull, to keep Sutpen from his appointed rounds.

I haven't seen Clara, of course. She's called me a few times from her cell phone; she's afraid the house line is bugged, which it probably is. "Are we ever going to see each other again?" she badgered me yesterday. "If I ever needed you, Kevin, it's now."

"Me too," I answered. "But we can't be idiots about this." Especially me—I'm the one who would take the bullet. I can't imagine Sutpen would shoot his best friend in cold blood, but in the dark, carrying a full load of rage and probably drunk, not knowing who that Scaramouche is who's balling his wife, anything's possible.

Still, I want to see her, even if we have to keep our clothes on. "Why don't you throw a dinner party this weekend?" I suggest. "A casual affair, a couple dozen of our regular crowd. It's better than nothing," I blunder on, desperate to persuade her; I've gone off the deep end for her more than I'd realized. "The way things are now, I'll take half a loaf. One slice will be better than starving to death."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea," she says dubiously. "The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lion and the lambs in one pen?" But in the next moment, she changes her mind. "Then again, maybe it will throw suspicion off us. Okay," she decides. "Saturday night for dinner and whatever follows. Consider yourself invited."

I've arrived at the Blue Dolphin before Sutpen. I plop down on my customary stool, the one that has the contours of my ass imprinted on it, and shred a cocktail napkin while Emily mixes my Manhattan. I order a draft Sierra Nevada along with the hard drink, to slow me down. I need to have my wits about me. Loose lips sink ships.

In a few minutes the door swings open and Sutpen enters, a shadowy figure backlit by the afternoon sun. His drink arrives as his butt hits Naugahyde. "Hey," he says in greeting, then immediately, tending to what's really important, he takes his first swallow of the day with a sensuality that's nakedly lascivious. I know the feeling.

"This is what I live for," he sighs contentedly. "This, and screwing over the less fortunate." He turns on his stool to face me. "You're invited for dinner Saturday night. You and the rest of the usual suspects."

I don't like that double entendre, even if it's innocuous. Maybe it isn't. Either way, I have to play it straight. "Clara called in my invitation this afternoon," I confirm. "Is this a special occasion?"

He rolls his eyes. "Just Clara being social. Rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic,* is how I see it." He smiles wickedly. "Who knows? Maybe lover-boy will show up."

"If he did, how would you know?" I ask. "Or do you have an actual candidate now?" I add, blowing more air into an already overinflated balloon. I'm scared to hear his answer, but I have to.

He shakes his head. "Not yet, but I'm getting closer. I can *taste* it, Kevin," he says with bloodthirsty glee, as if he's about to bite into a rare porterhouse. "And screw that adage about revenge tasting better when it's cold. I want this to be sizzling, burning." He raises his glass in toast. "To vindication, and completion," he proclaims.

"Hear, hear," I reply.

We knock off our drinks, and line up the glasses for the next round.

At times like this, work keeps me sane. I'm a partner in a small architectural firm. We do the occasional institutional or commercial building, but new homes, condo developments, and remodels are our bread and butter. Money has been pouring into this area over the past ten years, and everyone connected with construction has been living off the fat of the land.

It's Saturday afternoon. Today is one of those days when it

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would have been really useful if I could clone myself. I've been at the office since seven-thirty this morning. Saturday's my time for catching up on the paperwork that piles up on my desk during the week. It's a Sisyphean effort. Then, while I'm still burping up the residual effects of the Taco Bell lunch I ate at my desk, one of my clients calls in a panic. She has to see me, on site, now.

I drive over to see the site, which is in Montecito, the small, ultra-exclusive enclave east of the city of Santa Barbara that is home to the ten-million-dollar teardown. Hattie Winestock, my distressed client, is an attractive, rich widow in her mid fifties. If I was a bit older or she a tad younger I'd hit on her. She sold the house in Hope Ranch that she and her husband had lived in for twenty-five years and is renting at Miramar Beach while building her new one. I don't know that building a house from scratch, with all the angst you have to go through, was a wise choice for a woman her age, but it wasn't my decision. She wanted a new house that was free of emotional encumbrances, and so she shall have one.

Her parcel is a little under two acres. The front section is wooded, tall firs and eucalyptus. We're building the house in the back of the property so we can save most of the trees, which have the elevated value around here that cows have in India. In this case, saving the trees is practical; they'll provide privacy and separation from her neighbors, and act as a buffer against traffic. Even though it's going to be a pretty big house, 4,700 square feet, no one will be able to see it. It'll be like living in a cottage in the forest, except that the shops and restaurants of the Upper Village are less than five minutes away.

"What's up, pussycat?" she greets me as I get out of my car. She's smiling, but I see worry lines around her eyes. Her dog, an exuberant chocolate Lab bitch named Maxie, runs circles around me, barking her own greeting.

"Same old," I answer noncommittally, as I scratch Maxie behind the ears. Rule number one: Don't let clients into your personal life. They don't really care, and you leave yourself vulnerable to their needs, which are usually more imaginary than real. When you're rich like these people, you have a lot of time on your hands to worry about what can go wrong. Although in all honesty, Hattie isn't one of those people. Which is why I came right over.

"So what's wrong?" I ask her. She wouldn't have intruded on my Saturday afternoon if she didn't have a legitimate problem.

"Come on," she answers. "I'll show you." She bites her lip. "Maybe you should bring your camera."

That doesn't sound good. I grab my digital Canon out of the glove box and follow her. We walk along the driveway her contractor has bulldozed through the property to provide access to the homesite. Actual construction hasn't started yet, the job's still in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the grading stage. Next month, if all goes well (knock wood), they'll begin setting the foundation, tons of concrete and rebar to satisfy the earthquake standards. The plan is to have the foundation completed and signed off on before the start of the rainy season, so that work can continue during the winter months. If the builder falls behind schedule, everything may have to be put on hold until spring. No one wants that. Time is money, you don't want a job sitting around idle. And it's psychologically hard on the owner to stop. Contractors do everything under the sun they can to avoid that.

With Maxie leading the way, we emerge from the trees into the cleared area. "There," Hattie says, pointed a manicured finger. "What's that?"

On the southwest corner, right under what someday will be the master bedroom, there's a massive hole in the ground, a good fifteen feet in diameter. It wasn't there last week.

"Damn it to hell," I mutter under my breath.

"What did you say, Kevin?" Hattie asks fretfully.

"Nothing, Hattie. Wait here."

I walk over to the hole and look down into it. It's at least twenty feet deep. The dirt at the bottom is wet. Squatting down, I take some pictures. They're dark, but after I leave here I'll go back to the office and download them into my computer, where I can tweak them to get a better look. Then on Monday, I'll send a photographer out to take professional ones, for the record. But I can see the damage well enough to know what the problem is.

I walk back to my client. She's already shaking her head in anticipation. "That can't be good," she proclaims. "So what is it?"

"It's a sinkhole."

Her brow furrows. "What caused it?"

"I don't know," I tell her. "I'll call a geologist Monday morning who specializes in underground water problems, get him to come out here. Didn't you do a geological survey before you bought it?" I'm worried that there's an underground stream running through the property that no one ever knew about. If there is, it's back to the drawing board.

"I think so," she says, uncertain. "I'll call the broker. She was supposed to handle all that." She shakes her head in frustration. "So this sinkhole. What does it mean?"

"I don't know. I can't tell, until the geologist looks at it."

"Is it going to hold us up?"

I can't bullshit her about this. She's a tough bird, thankfully. "Yes," I answer. "Hopefully not for very long. But the county's going to get involved."

She groans. That's the worst news a home-builder can hear. Even a small, easily fixable problem like a ruptured water line can

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be stalled for months by the county bureaucracy. And I don't think this is a small problem.

We walk back to our cars. "I'm sorry," I tell her. I really am. She's a nice woman, who's suffered more than enough recently.

"It's only a house," she says philosophically. "I've been through worse."

"I'll call you Monday," I sign off. "We'll get this straightened out."

She thanks me. I hope I haven't made a hollow promise.

I download the pictures of the trouble at Hattie's project into my PowerBook. We won't know how dire this is until the geologist looks at it, but I have to be prepared for the worst, which could mean having to move the building site to another part of the property, redesigning the project altogether, or, worst-case scenario, abandoning it and suing the previous owner. I pray none of those is the case, but I'm not fooling myself; it's going to be bad.

I've cracked a bottle of Lafond Pinot Noir, the Santa Rita Hills designation, and I sip the wine from a Riedel burgundy glass as I try various riffs on the theme that is the Winestock house. I'm a snob when it comes to stemware. The proper wineglass enhances the specific characteristics of the varietal, and allows one to feel as if one is engaged in an ancient and noble enterprise, instead of merely getting besotted. Drinking wine with others, critiquing and comparing, is being sociable. Drinking wine by yourself is getting drunk.

My cell phone rings. Without checking to see who's on Caller ID, I answer it: "This is Kevin."

"I know who this is," Sutpen barks over the line. "The question is, *where* is Kevin?"

I'm about to say, "At my office, idiot, and what does it matter?" when I look up at the clock on the wall. Quarter after seven? How did it get so late all of a sudden?

"I had an emergency. With a client," I add, as if that legitimizes my faux pas. "What time is dinner, anyway? Not till eight, right?"

"*Dinner* is at eight, jerkoff, but have you never heard the expression 'cocktail hour,' which started at seven? There's twenty people here. You're the only one who hasn't shown. Which is not making my wife happy, since you're one of my few friends she can tolerate. When the little lady invites someone over for dinner *and cocktails,* and he doesn't show, she gets her dander up. You know how she can be, man."

I do. I also know this party was my idea, a chance for me to share an evening with Clara, even if all we can do is look longingly at each other from across a crowded room. Well, I've blown that. Whatever looks I get from her when I show up won't be lovey-dovey, I don't think.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I was just heading out the door. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Twenty, tops. Should I bring anything?"

"Just get over here."

He hangs up before I can say anything else in my defense, which is a good thing, because I don't have one.

I'm wearing volleyball shorts, a ragged T-shirt, and I haven't shaved or showered since yesterday morning. I lock up the office, jump into my car, and drive like a bandit to my house, where I clean up quicker than Speedy Gonzales. Grabbing a peace offering of '94 Caymus Special Selection Cabernet out of my wine cellar, I haul ass to Sutpen's house on the Riviera.

At ten minutes to eight, I'm at their door, which I enter without knocking. Sutpen and I don't bother with such formalities. He has the same carte blanche at my house. If you can't trust your best friend, who can you trust?

The party is rocking along nicely. About two dozen guests, mostly couples, a few stray singles like me. I know almost everybody here, so I meet and greet as I make my way to the kitchen to see my inamorata, who will be putting the final touches on her culinary masterpieces. On top of everything else, the woman can cook up a storm. Sutpen's a lucky man. Most of the time, I envy him.

The host waylays me in the pantry, where he's mixing up a pitcher of his famous martinis. "Finally!" he announces dramatically. His face is flushed. He's his own best customer. "The Iceman Cometh."

"What can I say? I'm sorry. Here." I thrust the bottle of wine at him. "A peace offering."

He looks at the bottle and smiles broadly. "This is Parker-rated ninety-five!" He makes an approximation of the sign of the cross in front of my face. "All is forgiven, my son." He opens a cabinet over his head and tucks the bottle away. "This is too good to share with the heathens," he whispers conspiratorially. "I'll save it for when it's just the three of us, or four, if you ever find a lady to your liking," he says. He thumbs towards the kitchen. "Go make your amends."

Clara's at the stove, her back to me. I come up behind her and tickle her ribs. She jumps. Turning around, she scowls when she sees it's me.

"Thanks for coming," she says acidly.

"Mea culpa." I take a step back. "You look wonderful. As always, but even better."

I'm practically drooling, staring at her. She's dressed to kill, fancier than the other women here, who are wearing summer-casual dresses and slacks. Her dress, protected from splatters by a chef's apron, is a slinky black sheath with a leg slit almost up to her hip. She's in high heels, her best pair of Manolo's, which she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wears when she really wants to showcase those terrific legs. She's even wearing stockings, real ones, with seams. Her hair is up in a French twist, and she's dabbed some exotic perfume behind her ears I've never smelled on her before. It takes considerable willpower not to lean over and bite her neck.

"You're totally gorgeous," I babble. I feel like a nerdy high-school senior who lucked out and got the homecoming queen to be his prom date. "I'll make it up to you, Clara. Whatever you want."

She cocks her head, as if thinking. Then she says, "Take me away from all this."

"Take you away . . ." My brain's a few beats behind the action. "Clara." I look behind me nervously, to see if anyone's overheard this. But no one has; we're alone. "This isn't . . ."

"Kevin. Lighten up. Do you think I'd say that seriously? Here? Now?"

"I don't know what to think." The first completely honest sentence I've said today. "This has been a tough time for me."

Her face softens. "For me, too." She brandishes the ladle in her hand. "Go out and be charming," she orders me. "I need to finish up in here."

She blows me a kiss and goes back to her cooking. I stand there for a moment, staring at her back, her ass, those incredible legs. Then I turn away and join the party.

Sutpen, his spirits fueled by multiple martinis, steers me over to a man about our age who's standing by himself, apart from the others. He's one of the few guests I don't know. Tall, thin, looks like he'd rather be somewhere else but will make the best of a tolerable situation. He's kind of a Sam Shepard type, if you had to categorize him. The middle of the summer, he's wearing jeans and cowboy boots; expensive ones, hand-tooled. A half-drunk bottle of Corona dangles loosely from his fingers.

"Kevin, say hello to Tom Parks," Sutpen introduces us. "Tom, this is my comrade-in-arms, Kevin Lomax." He smiles too broadly; the gin's working. "Clara and I met Tom and his wife a couple of years ago, at Telluride," he explains to me. "You're the only two unattached guys here tonight, so watch out," he warns us with a malicious grin. "There are predatory married women afoot who would love to use you to take out their marital frustrations with their husbands. You are thus forewarned." He claps me on the arm and laughs, a real belly guffaw. "Catch you on the rebound."

He drifts away, stranding me with this man no one else here knows. The two of us stand next to each other with a certain awkwardness. I can't think of anything to say to him, and I don't know if there's any significance to his wife's not being here. Beyond that, there's something about him that's off-putting. It's the packaging, I guess. The jeans and boots in the middle of summer, in a city

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where nobody wears them—you have to go forty miles into north country to find cowboys, not that he is one. And the way he holds his bottle of beer feels phony, like it's a prop.

Fortunately, I'm rescued by Tony Matheson's wife, Becky, who's on the board of every do-gooder organization in town.

"I've been meaning to catch up with you, Kevin," she trills above the din, linking her arm in mine. "I'm starting up a new project, and you're exactly the man to help me. Excuse us," she tosses at Parks as she leads me away.

Bottles of whiskey and wine are lined up on a chiffonier in the living room. I pour myself a shot of fifteen-year-old Macallan. Becky hovers at my elbow. "Who is he?" she whispers hoarsely.

"Who?"

"The man you were talking with."

I glance over my shoulder. Parks is standing where we left him. But he isn't alone now. Clara is next to him, engaging him in conversation. He's listening attentively.

"I don't know," I answer. "Some friend of Sutpen and Clara's. Why?"

"Just curious," she says. She's staring at him over my shoulder. "He's cute. He isn't wearing a wedding ring," she observes from afar.

"Your point being?" I'm looking at Clara, hoping to catch her eye, but she's engrossed with this new guy. As she talks to him, she reaches out and touches his forearm with the tips of her fingers. He smiles at whatever she's told him, and leans in closer to her.

I can feel my body flushing with jealousy. Who the hell is this guy, what's he doing here, and what's his relationship to my hosts?

I drink some scotch to calm myself. The man is here by himself, he doesn't know anyone, Clara is being kind. What other explanation could there be?

I turn away from watching them, to Becky. "So what's this new scheme you want to inveigle me in?" I tease her.

"We can talk about it later." She drifts away.

She was dishing for dirt about the mysterious stranger and I couldn't provide it, so I'm of no use to her. Which is fine with me. I don't like gossip. It's a petty form of communication. And it's usually hurtful, full of schadenfreude and gamesmanship.

Sutpen joins me as I'm freshening my drink. "Clara isn't mad at you anymore. Thought you'd want to know."

"Glad to hear it," I say. I look across the room. His wife and Parks are still together. Although the room is almost elbow-to-elbow with people, they've somehow carved out a space for themselves apart from the rest of us.

"So what's the deal with this Parks guy?" I ask, trying to sound nonchalant. "He and Clara seem to be enjoying each other's company."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"He and his wife split up recently," he informs me. "She's being nice to him."

"Um," I mumble. What I'm seeing looks cozier than nice.

"He's been in town for about a month," Sutpen further explains. "He's an archaeologist at one of the Midwestern universities. He's here doing research with some archaeologists at UCSB."

He looks over at Parks and Clara for a moment, then turns back to me. "He and his wife split up last year. She left him, which shook him up. He's not the type who's used to being dumped. You can tell by the way he carries himself he fancies he's God's gift to women. Frigging cowboy boots. Give me a break." He tosses back his drink. His eyes are bloodshot, and it's still early. "We were the only people in town he knew, so he gravitated to us. It's gotten to be a drag, actually; he's insinuated himself into our lives more than we'd like." He grimaces as if his drink had suddenly turned sour. "Fortunately, he's leaving tomorrow. Going off to South America on an archaeological dig, so he'll be out of our hair, praise the Lord. I wasn't going to invite him tonight, but Clara insisted. She was afraid the poor dear would find out and be hurt." He laughs, and pours himself another shot. "Like I could care about hurting some moke's feelings I'm never going to see again." He drinks up. "What the hell. It's a party. We're going to have fun. Them's the rules."

Dinner is served buffet-style. We carry our plates out on the deck, overlooking the city and the ocean. I try to worm my way next to Clara, but Parks has beaten me to the spot. They're sitting at the edge of the deck, a cozy little twosome in some private world that's closed to the rest of us. She keeps touching him: his hand, arm, knee. He's giving back as good as he gets, even dropping his hand to rest on her bare knee for a moment before letting it slide off. It's as if they're totally captivated by each other and don't give a damn if anyone notices it.

I'm bummed, but I can't show it. I look around, wondering if anyone else has tuned in to what I'm watching. I notice some furtive glances in their direction, but no one is brazen enough to stare openly.

What's surprising to me is that Sutpen seems oblivious to the moves his wife and Parks are putting on each other. Maybe he's had too much to drink and doesn't see what's going down. He's playing the convivial host, flitting from group to group like a stoned butterfly. He plops down next to me and poaches a nacho off my plate.

"Having a good time?" he asks blankly.

"Sure," I answer. I should hold my tongue, but I can't. "I don't know what the point of my rushing over here was. Clara could care less if I'm here," I pout. "She's not exactly circulating tonight."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sutpen gives me a quizzical shrug, then turns and looks across the deck to Clara and Parks. "It's a game," he says. "She's trying to piss me off."

"If it was my wife acting like that, I wouldn't like it."

"Well, she isn't your wife. Anyway, so what if they make goo-goo eyes at each other? That's how she is, you know Clara. How many times has she flirted with you?" He's drinking beer now, and he takes a deep pull from his bottle. "That kind of adolescent behavior is the least of my problems." He leans in closer. "You know what I'm talking about."

I nod. "Any progress there?"

"Could be," he answers cryptically. "Bonnie'll call me when it's time."

He gets up and shuffles over to the serving table, where he piles a plate high with food. I'm glad he's eating; all that drinking on an empty stomach would fell an ox. My eye drifts off him, back to Clara and Parks. She's talking to him intensely. He's listening, his ear an inch from her mouth, nodding like a bobblehead. A few times he looks up furtively, as if worried that they're being watched. Each time, I turn away before he catches me spying on them.

The serious talking and drinking gets into swing after dinner. Clara is playing the good hostess now, moving from group to group, garnering compliments on her cooking and charming everyone. She waits until I'm by myself at the bar, freshening my drink (a weak vodka and tonic now, I've about had my limit), before she sidles up to me.

"Having fun?" she asks mischievously. She traces a fingernail down my forearm.

I don't feel like playing games with her tonight. "What do you think?"

"Poor baby," she coos. "Is his feelings hurt?"

"Do you mind telling me what's going on?"

"What do you mean?" she asks, all wide-eyed and innocent.

"Come on, Clara. You've been dry-humping that drugstore cowboy all night long."

She checks to make sure no one's overhearing this conversation. "You're exaggerating, Kevin. I was just being nice to a lonely man."

"Well, I'm lonely, too," I reply, "and you haven't been nice to me. Are you punishing me for showing up late?"

Her smile fades. "No. That's not it." She touches my hand. "We'll talk about this . . . later."

She leaves me, walks over to a group of friends, and says something to her husband, who is regaling them with old war stories. He shakes his head distractedly, then turns away from her and continues his story, openly ignoring her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She stands there for a moment, stung. Then she turns on her heel and goes into the house.

I look around. Parks is nowhere to be seen. He must have gone to the bathroom. I feel the urge myself. I drain my glass, crunch the ice cubes between my teeth, and go inside.

The party petered out around midnight. I didn't see much of Clara for the rest of the evening, and I didn't see Parks at all. Maybe he left once she stopped giving him her undivided attention. Or maybe I've swallowed too many sour grapes.

The phone rings. I rouse myself out of the black hole I'd fallen into and look at the clock. It's two-thirty. I shake off the cobwebs and fumble for the receiver. "Hello?" I mumble.

"Get over here right away," Sutpen commands me. His voice is low and harsh, as if he's swallowed a mouthful of glass.

I'm more asleep than awake. "What're you talking about?"

"Just get here." He hangs up before I can protest.

I stagger out of bed and throw on the clothes I wore to the party, which I had dropped on the floor earlier like Hansel and Gretel leaving a trail of breadcrumbs. Standing in my dark kitchen, I gulp down two glasses of water to try and clear my head. They don't help. I would take the time to make a pot of coffee, but it was clear from the urgency in Sutpen's voice that time is of the essence.

The streets are deserted. I get to their house in less than ten minutes. All the lights are out. As I pull up, Sutpen emerges from the shadows at the side of the house. He looks terrible—clothes rumpled, hair askew. Even in the dark I can see that his eyes are wild.

"Come on," he says. "You have to help me."

Something is seriously wrong. "What's going on, man?" I ask him.

"You'll see."

We go inside. I follow him through the dark house to his study, feeling my way along so I don't slam into something.

"Tighten your sphincter," he orders me. Then he turns on his desk lamp.

Parks is lying on the floor, facedown. He's clothed, but his pants are down around his ankles. There's a bullet hole in his shirt, next to his left shoulder blade. There isn't much blood on him, but I can see a dark stain under his body that has oozed onto the carpet.

I grab the desk to keep from falling down. "Jesus Christ, Sutpen," I gasp.

"We've got to get him out of here," he says. "I can't do it by myself."

I stare at the corpse. "You *shot* him? What for?"

He stares at me. "For the reason I told you."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You mean . . ." My head is reeling. I feel like I'm going to puke.

"I was suspicious of him all along," he says, "but I didn't have any proof. Until tonight."

He pulls his cell phone out of his pocket and turns it on. It's one of those phones that has a camera feature. You can take up to a dozen digital pictures, or a thirty-second video. Holding it up so that I can see it, he hits the PLAY button.

The quality isn't good because the light is bad, but I can clearly make out what he recorded. Clara is facing the camera, in three-quarter profile. Her dress has been pulled up above her waist, and her underpants are at her feet. She's still in her stockings and heels. Her eyes are closed, squeezed shut. Parks is pressed up to her, his back to the camera. His pants are down, bunched up over his fancy cowboy boots.

Sutpen snaps the phone shut once he sees I've had a good enough look. He's enraged, but he's cold about it, containing it.

He lays out the timeline. "It started shortly after Parks got to town. I knew almost immediately that something fishy was going down, but it didn't register at first." He shakes his head, as if he can't believe all this has really happened. "Bonnie's been on the case. She's been following him. Yesterday, she saw them together at an isolated area of Hendry's Beach." He exhales heavily. "That's when I knew for sure."

He looks up at me. "You're white as a sheet, Kevin. Which I can understand." He grabs my arm. "But you've got to get a grip on yourself. You're the only friend in the world I can trust to help me with this."

He's right: I feel terrible, but not because Sutpen murdered this poor chump. It's Clara's perfidy that's burning the hole in my stomach. Sutpen's not the only one who's been betrayed.

"Where's Clara?" I ask him.

"Gone. She ran as soon as he was shot." He stares at me. His eyes are pinpricks. "She didn't see who did it."

She'll swear to that, of course. Whether she really did see Sutpen, only she knows. The police certainly won't.

"Let's go," Sutpen says brusquely. "I know where to take him."

I jerk in surprise. "You're not going to call the police?"

He laughs bitterly. "Are you insane?"

I'm not the one who's crazy, but I'm not going to start an argument over that. "Why shouldn't you?" I try to reason with him. "An intruder comes into your house and murders a guest. No one was here until you stumbled in and found the body."

He shakes his head. "Can't take the chance." He bends down and starts to roll the body up in the carpet. "Come on. I've got it all figured out."

We carry the body outside and stuff it in the trunk of his Mercedes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

S500, which he's lined with heavy plastic wrap. I follow in my car as he drives down Alameda Padre Serra, the long windy road that leads into town. No one sees us. He leads me through the commercial center of the city, now dark, into the Funk Zone, a four-block-square section of small businesses near the waterfront: surf shops, woodworking studios, artists' lofts. For years, developers have salivated over this area, but no one was ever able to persuade the city, the county, and the Coastal Commission, all of which have the power of veto, to upgrade it; it's part of the soul of old Santa Barbara, which is institutionally resistant to change. Finally, last year, a local developer with a good environmental record (for a developer) convinced the powers that be to let him build a small, elegant hotel at the edge of the zone, one that would enhance the area rather than overwhelm it.

I designed the hotel. Sutpen was the lawyer who carried the developer's water throughout the process. Now I know where he's leading me, and why.

He parks at the edge of a huge hole in the ground that someday will be the hotel's underground parking garage. I pull up behind him. We get out of our cars and look into the abyss.

"You know what's happening on Monday, don't you?" he asks me.

I nod. The forms have been dug and all the steel has been set, hundreds of poles of rebar. At seven o'clock Monday morning they're going to start pouring concrete for the foundation. Thousands of square yards of cement will flow into this pit. Anything down there will be entombed in a concrete vault for all eternity, or long enough that the difference won't matter.

We hoist the body out of Sutpen's trunk. It's starting to stiffen up. We position it over the hole and drop it down. It hits the dirt bottom with a thump. Then he reaches deeper into the trunk, and brings forth two shovels.

"This won't take long," he says.

We climb a ladder down to the bottom, which is loose-packed dirt. Putting our shoulders to the shovels, we dig a shallow hole, deep enough to bury the body in. Then we cover the remains with the dirt we had shoveled aside, smoothing out the surface enough so that you wouldn't know there was anything under it, unless you were looking for something specific. No one will be. By noon on Monday morning, a carpet of flowing cement will be the tomb of the unknown archaeologist.

We stand by our cars, dusting the dirt off our clothes. Sutpen takes a last look down into the hole. "Everybody and his brother was looking for Jimmy Hoffa, and they haven't found him yet," he says with less emotion than if we had just buried the family dog. "So they're definitely not going to find some obscure professor who has no family to raise a hue and cry." He claps some more dirt off his hands. "Go home, Kevin," he orders me. "Go to sleep. Take a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Valium if you have to. When you wake up, it'll be like it was a bad dream."

It's almost dawn when I pull up to my house. I'm wiped out, more emotionally than physically. I'm an accessory to murder. How in the world did it ever come to this?

I get out of my car, shuffle up my walkway, scoop the newspapers off the lawn, and start to unlock the front door.

"Kevin."

Clara's a few feet behind me; she's been waiting for me. Why am I not surprised? "You shouldn't be here," I tell her.

"This is *exactly* where I should be," she replies. She looks behind her, an involuntary twitch. "Let's go inside."

I unlock the door. She follows me in. My anger's rising now; it's giving me a second wind.

"Your husband murdered a man tonight, because of you," I rage at her. "You must be very proud of yourself. Congratulations."

She stares at me in astonishment. "You're not a part of this?" She throws my anger back in my face. "You're not angry because Sutpen killed some chump and made you help him get rid of the body," she declares hotly. "You're angry because I boned him!"

I have no retort for that, because she's smack-on.

"And I thought you were a smart guy." She comes closer to me. I can smell that perfume on her. I can't help it; it's intoxicating. I feel like I'm suffocating.

"You're mad because you think I was cheating on you. You're as bad as Sutpen."

"I didn't kill anybody."

"Neither did I," she answers sharply. "But I didn't stand around with my thumb up my can, either, like you." She squares up against me. "You think I was having an affair with Tom Parks? Good Lord, give me *some* credit."

"I saw the pictures," I tell her. "The camera doesn't lie." Pretty damn pathetic, but it's the best I can come up with at the moment.

She looks like she wants to deck me. "I did it with him that one time. And I was biting my cheek to stop from screaming."

I start to turn away, but she grabs me and makes me look at her.

"I did it for you, you idiot. I saved a life. *Yours,* Kevin. Sutpen was going to kill someone over what we did. Nobody was going to stop him, he's a force of nature." Her fingers tighten on my bicep. "I had no choice. I couldn't let it be you."

I can't think, let alone speak. Fortunately, I don't have to. She's doing all the thinking and talking for both of us.

"Either my husband was going to kill you or we could never see each other again, both of which I couldn't handle. And then, by some perverted stroke of luck . . ." Her eyes drift upward for a moment, towards some vague afterlife space up in the sky. ". . . Tom

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Parks fell into our laps. Still in shock from his divorce, with a ridiculous crush on me from back when we met. Single, no family ties, leaving in the morning, literally disappearing into the jungle, not returning home for three months. By the time anyone figured out he was missing, no one would ever know what happened to him." Her laugh is guttural, mirthless. "If there is a God, he sure does work in mysterious ways, doesn't he?"

I stare at her in wonder, awe, and fear. Women are the weaker sex? Does anyone really believe that?

Her hand is shaking on my bare arm. "It was the easiest seduction I've ever done. And the most painful."

"What if Sutpen hadn't caught you in the act last night?" I ask her, groping to get my mind around this. "Parks was leaving in the morning. Then what would you have done?" What I'm thinking is, *Who would have been your next victim?* I keep my dumb mouth shut.

She smiles, as if she had anticipated that. "I know my husband. He was going to catch me. I made sure of that. You saw how I was last night with Parks. A blind man could have read those signs." Her smile withers. "Sutpen may be crazy, he may be homicidal, but he isn't going to commit the same murder twice. He got his revenge." She takes my hand. "And I've got you."

Some little prick of conscience in the back of my brain is trying to tell me that this is all wrong. But it isn't getting through.

"We're home free now," she tells me triumphantly. She wraps her arms around me and kisses me on the mouth. Then she takes me by the hand and yanks me into my house. Like a moth drawn to a flame, I can't stop myself from letting her.

I get to the Blue Dolphin first. I'm drinking beer today; I need to keep my mind clear. Sutpen's call was dark, ambiguous, threatening.

It's been three weeks since Sutpen killed Parks and I helped him get rid of the body. Since Clara left my house the morning after, she and I have stayed clear of each other; being the reason a man was killed can lay a blanket of ice over even the hottest of passions. We've talked on the phone, and we've agreed we need a temporary hiatus from each other. A few more weeks and we can start up again. Out of town for openers, a romantic weekend in San Francisco; a fresh, clean start-over. She'll make all the arrangements—she's got the whole deal wired. *Just hang tight a few more weeks,* she implores me. *I know it's hard. On me, too,* she whispers into the phone before she hangs up.

I'm ambivalent about our relationship, but I know that when she jiggles her pinkie at me I'll come running, wagging my tail. We're stuck with each other, to each other. If we tried to pull apart

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now we'd rip our flesh to shreds. And I can't help it. I'm crazy about her. The heart knows what it knows.

Sutpen plops his ass down on the stool next to mine. "What're you drinking?" he asks me, looking at my glass with suspicion. He's flushed, and his shirttail is untucked under his suit coat, a dead giveaway that something big is troubling him; he's always as squared away as a West Point cadet in his sartorial presentation, even when he isn't on the job.

"Sierra Nevada," I answer. "On draft."

"Beer gives me gas," he says. "But a beer would be good now. Gotta keep my wits about me. Har-de-har-har. I'm beginning to wonder if I ever had a brain."

He catches Emily's eye and points to my glass. She takes a mug out of the freezer below the bar and draws him a cold one.

Sutpen rubs his knuckles on his forehead like he's trying to rub off a set of horns. Then he turns to me. His stare is more intense than Vince Lombardi's. "I screwed up, man. Big-time. I killed the wrong guy."

My knee on the barstool rung starts tattooing an Elvin Jones solo. How did he find out? Did Clara, in a moment of guilt, drunkenness, or just flat-out insanity, spill her guts? I can't imagine her breaking down, but she is human, if only occasionally.

I wonder if he's packing. He wouldn't have the audacity to kill me in here, but somewhere. The man committed murder, another one isn't going to matter if he ever goes to trial.

I flinch as he reaches into his inside breast-pocket. He pulls out a legal-sized envelope, drops it on the bar between us. "Read 'em and weep," he says in a flat monotone. He grabs his mug and takes a long swallow.

I open the envelope and shake out the contents. Digital photographs, printed off a computer. I spread them out on the bar and look at them.

Clara and a man in a room. An upscale hotel, it looks like. The whole megillah: combinations she and I have never even talked about, let alone tried.

I feel like a kid sneaking his first peek at *Penthouse,* under the covers. This knocks the wind out of me. And it hurts like hell, too. Love is so frigging blind. *As if Clara ever had any real emotions about me,* I rage inwardly with 20/20 hindsight. My brain starts cramping like I'm having a full-blown migraine.

"You're shaking," Sutpen says, watching me staring at the pictures. "I don't blame you, looking at this perversion. Jesus, talk about playing the cuckold. I feel like the dumbest turd that ever got flushed down the toilet." He gulps down half his glass. "And I didn't even get it right."

I am shaking, but not because I was party to a wrongful death, if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

any murder could be called that. *He's* the cuckold? He doesn't have a clue about what's really happening.

"Recognize him?"

I nod. My head feels like it's made of wood. "Wally Schaffer."

Clara's interior decorator. She's been redoing their house for months. It's this year's hobby, like golf last year, and serving on the art forum the year before.

"He's always around, but I thought he was light in his loafers. He's an interior decorator," Sutpen laments. "Aren't they all gay?"

Apparently not. I'm still shaking, but for a very different reason now.

"Bonnie Walsh finally got the real goods. It's been going on for several months. Almost a year."

He scoops the pictures back into the envelope and puts it in his pocket. "They're going to L.A. together this weekend. New furniture for my study. Like I care."

He drains the rest of his beer in one long swallow. "They're booked into a cottage at a hotel in the hills above Malibu. Lots of spacing between units, for privacy. I'm going down Saturday night. Drop in late on the lovebirds, after all the night owls are back in their nests and there's nothing stirring except the air. And this time, I'll get it right."

He turns to me, his old comrade-in-arms and more recent partner in crime. "I know this is asking a lot, Kevin, but I could use your company." Quickly, he adds, "If you can't, I completely understand."

I give Emily the high sign: We're past Miller time now. She takes down two cocktail glasses, starts fixing our drinks.

"I'll come with you," I tell him. If for no other reason than to savor the expression on Clara's face when we make our unholy entrance.

"Good man," he says, smiling in relief. "I can always count on you, old buddy."

Emily puts our drinks down in front of us: my Manhattan, his martini. I raise my glass in toast. "After all," I say, as I take my first delicious swallow, "what are friends for?" ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:

ELLERY QUEEN
6 Prowitt Street
Norwalk, CT 06855

For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving. Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE BOOK CASE

by Dale C. Andrews & Kurt Sercu

Dale Andrews is a lawyer for the U.S. Department of Transportation and Kurt Sercu is head nurse in a casualty ward in Sijsele, Belgium. They are longtime Ellery Queen fans who first met on-line through "Ellery Queen, a Website of Deduction," run by Mr. Sercu. Both attended the EQ Centenary Symposium in '05, where they met in person—outlining this intricate story on a train they both took after the event. ¶

Prologue

A chilly March wind whistled through the open window of the apartment, rustling the papers on the desk and puffing the white corn-silk hair on the old man's head. He raised a thin arm to his brow and absent-mindedly smoothed his hair back into place as he scanned the letter lying on the desktop in front of him. When he was finished he pulled a blank sheet from a stack of notepads, scrawled a short sentence on it, reached for an envelope, addressed it, and then sealed the note inside. He dropped the envelope into a box on the corner of the desk, and turned to the pretty young red-haired woman patiently reading a book in the leather chair across the room.

"I think that will do it for today, Nikki. Can you see that these are posted?"

Part 1: Reunions

Detective Harry Burke shifted his weight as he waited for the elevator to arrive. His bum right knee ached and he wondered, not for the first time, if maybe he was getting just a bit old for this line of work. He eyed his young partner ruefully. Stanley Santos, with his pegged slacks, turtleneck, and short-cropped mousse-spiked black hair, was the future. Not a transplanted ageing Scotsman like him, staring down a rapidly approaching retirement and the pension that might let him live almost comfortably somewhere, but surely not here.

Surely not here indeed. The West Park Towers was everything he had come to dislike in the New York City of this new century.

©2007 by Dale C. Andrews and Kurt Sercu; Ellery Queen characters ©2007 by Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee Literary Property Trusts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Excess masquerading as taste, money intruding on refinement and dignity. Sure, the marble floors squeaked, the rooms were magically expanded by the placement of mirrors. But where was the soul? Where was the New York City he had first fallen for decades ago? The bustling, cramped city of his youth? Well, he supposed a lot of it was still out there. But it sure wasn't in here. The elevator door opened and he and Santos stepped in.

The apartment on the thirty-sixth floor was more of the same. Harry sniffed as he walked through the living room with its spare, ascetic furniture and its neatly displayed Oriental art. But this time Harry did not sniff in disdain. He sniffed, instead, in anticipation of the smell that always recurred in his line of work. The unmistakable coppery smell of death.

Harry and Santos turned the corner into the study and across the room from them, sprawled in a pool of blood on top of a desk, was what remained of Dr. Jason Tenumbra. In front of the desk there was more blood, splattered in smaller pools going toward the doorway, where a brass and ebony electrical clock lay on the floor, unplugged. The clock's hands were frozen at eight-thirty.

Harry pushed past the three policemen and the representative of the coroner's office to approach the desk, a single sheet of glass supported by chrome sawhorses. He surveyed the surface—a flat-screen computer display, a wireless keyboard, and a wireless mouse. Tenumbra was lying facedown in the middle, hands pulled up under his chest, in the pool of congealed blood.

"What do we know?" Harry asked.

"We know," Santos answered, "that up until yesterday Dr. Jason Tenumbra was a modern-day success story. A graduate of Johns Hopkins, an M.D. with post-graduate training in oncology and psychiatry from New York University. He was well off, too—used to be married to Janiel Friedman, who runs the Friedman and Norr department-store chain.

"Tenumbra didn't show up at his office this morning. His appointments didn't begin until the afternoon, but when the lunch hour came and went and no one could reach him by phone, his staff contacted the concierge desk. A building employee found the body. He entered the apartment with a passkey—actually, a magnetic entry card—and called us as soon as he was done being sick."

"Any witnesses?"

"Nope. But the concierge screens all visitors. We're getting the list once they can pull it off the computer. Judging by the blood on the floor, and the clock, it looks like Tenumbra may have lunged after the murderer. But then he must have returned to the desk, where he died."

Squinting, Harry eyed the bookcase behind the desk.

"What the hell . . . ?!"

"Yeah," Santos replied. "I, for the life of me, don't know what

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that is all about."

Both men gazed at the bookcase. While the books on either side of the desk were arranged neatly, spine to spine, directly behind the lifeless body of Dr. Tenumbra all of the books had been pulled from the shelves. They lay piled haphazardly on the floor of the study behind the corpse.

From across the room one of the uniformed policemen approached.

"The coroner is finished with the initial forensics. They say we're free to check out the body."

As the two officers turned the body over, two things presented themselves to Harry Burke. The first was the silver scalpel protruding from the bloody center of Tenumbra's throat. The second, less obvious, was the small sheet of paper, barely visible, clasped in the doctor's bloody death grip. Harry gingerly pried apart the fingers of the corpse and unfolded the paper. "Son of a bitch!" he exclaimed, wide-eyed.

"What? What is it?" asked Santos, but already Harry was on his knees examining the pile of books.

"Son of a bitch!" he repeated. "Goddammit, of all the people I didn't expect to run into again . . ."

Santos bent over the desk to examine the paper. At the top was a date: March 30, 2007. Below the date one sentence was scrawled: "I have received your inquiry, but I have no books that I wish to sell." Across the top of the note, finely embossed above a black line, was a name: "Ellery Queen." Only then did Stanley Santos also gaze down at the books scattered on the floor. Each bore the name on the note—"Ellery Queen."

Santos shook his head, perplexed. "Who the hell is Ellery Queen?"

The sunlight in the apartment was dwindling when Harry and Stanley Santos heard the soft knocking. They turned as a uniformed officer opened the door. Into the room walked an ancient but remarkably erect man dressed in tweeds. He supported himself with a cane in his right hand, and a young woman—late twenties, Santos thought (he had an eye for that particular detail)—lightly supported the old man on his left. Stanley glanced at his partner, who stared wide-eyed at the couple.

Harry Burke watched the old man's approach in amazement. He was ancient. Harry couldn't remember ever seeing anyone older. The gait was halting, and the old man seemed to move only through sheerest willpower. Harry offered his hand. "Ellery," he said, "it has certainly been a long time."

"That, Harry, it has."

At the sound of the old man's voice Harry Burke was lost in a second wave of amazement. The voice was unchanged, unbowed by age.

"Dad told me years ago that you had returned to this side of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pond," the old man continued, "and I knew you'd joined the force here. . . . But I understood why you might not want to renew our acquaintance."

"Those times were tough on me," Harry agreed. "The way they ended . . ." He fell awkwardly silent.

For a moment Santos wondered what was up with his partner, but then quickly dismissed such idle curiosity. Who really cared? "Mr. Queen," he said, intruding between Burke and the elderly man, "maybe you two can catch up on old times later. We could have handled this over the phone, as I told your . . ." He searched for a word. ". . . companion. . . ."

"Ms. Porter is my assistant, Officer . . . ?"

"Santos." Stanley replied. "Stan Santos. And it's Detective. As I told Ms. Porter, we're investigating a murder in which you may have some involvement." Santos held up the bloodstained note, now protected in a plastic Ziploc bag. "Do you recognize this?"

Ellery stared at the note, his left eye squinted almost shut. "I do, indeed. It's one of my notepads, and the writing is mine." Turning to Nikki he asked, "When was it that we sent this out?"

"One week ago." She turned toward Santos. "A little over a week ago we received an inquiry from a Dr. Jason Tenumbra, who, I believe," she glanced around the room nervously, "you told me is the victim. Dr. Tenumbra said that he was a collector of books, particularly detective first editions. He inquired whether Mr. Queen would be interested in selling copies of certain books that he wrote many years ago."

"What? Detective stories?" Santos asked.

Ellery raised an eyebrow. "Actually he was interested in some nonfiction writings of mine, analytic works concerning the detective novel."

"Any idea why Tenumbra would have had the note in his hand when he died?"

"None at all," replied Ellery, "but I can assure you that at whatever time he did in fact die, Ms. Porter should be able to corroborate that I was either napping, working on Sudoku puzzles, or taking medicine. That's about all I do nowadays."

"There's something else that you'll be interested in," Santos said, and gestured toward the pile of books still scattered behind the glass-and-chrome desk in the study.

Supported by Nikki, Ellery crossed the room to the pile of books. "First editions," he murmured. "Tell me, the volume under that one—" he gestured to the left—"is that *The French Powder Mystery*?"

Nikki bent down to examine the book.

"Yes," she said, "and it has a dust jacket."

Ellery turned and surveyed the rest of the library, still neatly shelved. "Apparently Dr. Tenumbra was an organized fellow," he observed. "His library is grouped by author, and then arranged

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

alphabetically. So the volumes on the floor, the Queen works, were shelved between the Poe collection and the Ruth Rendell/Barbara Vine books."

Ellery turned back toward Santos and Harry Burke. "I can't tell you why these books are on the floor. But I may be able to give you a pretty educated guess as to where Dr. Tenumbra acquired them. To my knowledge, there are virtually no remaining volumes of *The French Powder Mystery* with original dust jackets. In fact, I personally know of only two. I have one. This is, no doubt, the other. These books were almost certainly from Djuna's library. There should be an inscription in the front cover."

Santos donned a pair of plastic gloves and gingerly picked up the red volume. Flipping open the front cover he read: "To Djuna, with continuing admiration and thanks, Ellery Queen." Santos turned back toward the old man. "You mind telling me who this Djuna is?"

"Djuna worked for my father and me decades ago when he was little more than a boy. He was an orphan. We supported him and eventually sent him off to school. I used Djuna, or someone much like Djuna, as a character in my early novels. This was always a source of pride to him. He was always obsessed with the analytic process, that and sports. I retired from writing in nineteen seventy-one, and from editing in nineteen eighty-two, but when I was still writing I always sent Djuna an inscribed first edition of every book in which Dad or I appeared as characters."

"Maybe we need to talk to this fellow," Santos muttered.

"That," replied Ellery, "won't be possible. Djuna and his wife died in the late nineteen eighties. I suspect these books must have been acquired from the estate. I don't know why, but Dad and I somehow lost touch with Djuna and his family a long, long time ago. After graduating from Columbia, Djuna opened a successful Westside restaurant that eventually grew into a chain. He was a workaholic. He didn't even marry until the mid 'fifties, when he was already in his forties. Djuna and his wife were unable to have children, but they eventually adopted two newborns, in the late nineteen sixties, I think. Quinn and Elise. Both of the children attended Columbia as well. I haven't seen either of them for years but I believe Quinn eventually became a doctor. Elise was a professor of English at Columbia the last I heard."

Harry Burke looked up sharply at this. "Wait a minute," he said, and stepped back into the living room. Returning, he handed a pad of paper to Santos. The top sheet bore the inscription: "Dr. Jason Tenumbra, Dr. Quinn Djuna, Consulting Psychiatric Services."

Santos's eyes met Burke's. "Yeah," Burke said. "Apparently they were partners. Another thing. I was just on the phone with Tenumbra's office. Dr. Djuna wasn't due in the office until this afternoon, and now he hasn't shown up either. The office can't raise anyone on his phone. His apartment is two blocks from here.

CC-0 UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I was just about to send a couple of uniforms over."

"Let's do this ourselves. I'm starting to have a bad feeling," Santos muttered.

"That," said Ellery, "would make at least two of us. If you could slow the pace a little, perhaps Ms. Porter and I might be permitted to tag along?"

Dr. Quinn Djuna's apartment building was much more to Harry Burke's liking. Old and solid, 1930s New York, with gargoyles on the roof. And no concierge here, just a management company that grudgingly reported that if entry to Dr. Djuna's apartment was required, their files showed that his sister, Professor Elise Djuna, had custody of the spare key. She had already been called by the precinct and had been informed of both Tenumbra's murder and the need to locate her brother.

Harry Burke therefore was not surprised when an attractive dark-haired woman in her late thirties, dressed bookishly in slacks, an oxford shirt, and a twill jacket, anxiously approached them in the lobby. But before she could speak, the old man in the foursome placed a gentle hand on her forearm. She looked at him uncomprehendingly at first, but then her eyes widened in shocked recognition.

"Elise," Ellery said, "do you remember me? I am afraid it's been a good many years."

"Mr. Queen . . . Ellery . . . What are you doing here?"

"Either helping out the authorities or getting in their way. Presently I don't know which. It may depend on one's perspective." He cocked his head to one side, narrowed his eyes appraisingly, and smiled. "Your father would have been proud. You have grown into a splendid young woman."

"Not as young as all that." She paused and smiled. "I'm glad you're here. I'm a bit frantic. I've been trying to reach Quinn since yesterday, and then I got the call to meet the police here. I don't know what this is all about, but I'd do anything for my brother. He's all the family I have left. I owe him my life. If anything happened to him . . . "

Santos broke in impatiently. "Right now, if you don't mind, we need to get upstairs."

The elevator deposited them in a long corridor carpeted in frayed Oriental patterns. Halfway down the hall Elise stopped, fumbled for a key, and opened the door of an apartment, revealing a large, comfortably furnished living room. As they stepped inside, Ellery's eyes widened and he caught the same expression on Harry Burke's face. This time they both smelled it.

A fast survey revealed the source. In the bathroom adjacent to the apartment's single bedroom, in a tub filled with blood-tinged water, floated the body of Dr. Quinn Djuna, both wrists slit. Ellery sighed, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

nose just as Elise began to scream.

Part 2: Out of Retirement

Several weeks later, Harry Burke stood in front of the still-familiar brownstone on West 87th Street shaking his head. The disconnect was surreal—like suddenly being in the company of a relative long since departed. For a period of a few hectic weeks, many years before, he had practically lived here. Harry sighed, squared his shoulders, and climbed the stairs to the front door.

Once inside the apartment his feeling of disconnect remained. The room was virtually unchanged. Over the fireplace the sabers were still crossed; the Thiraud portrait still stared with eyes that reached every corner of the room. And then there was Ellery—Harry could still find the face of his friend in this old man, but his aspect now also reminded him of the inspector.

"Harry, it's good to see you again." Ellery smiled from across the room, beckoning Burke to a chair as Nikki closed the front door and retreated to the kitchen for coffee. "I take it that together you and your partner have made some progress?"

"Actually, Ellery, Santos and I hardly do anything 'together.' We don't see eye-to-eye on much of anything, and this case is no exception. I'm here officially, but I'm also here on my own."

Ellery raised an inquiring eyebrow and Burke continued. "As far as Santos is concerned, this case is finished. It's a simple murder-suicide, and he may be right. It turns out that Dr. Djuna had a motive to kill Dr. Tenumbra and a reason to take his own life as well. Until recently Djuna was engaged to a rather well-known Long Island socialite, Rhonda St. Regis. The engagement ended rather badly several weeks ago, and it was Dr. Djuna's partner, Dr. Tenumbra, who became, shall we say, the third side of the triangle.

"Apparently Tenumbra's collector proclivities went beyond detective stories. Over the years he gained quite a reputation as a ladies' man. He spent the last few months pursuing his partner's fiancée. St. Regis might have been one in a string to him, but she was apparently a lot more to Dr. Djuna. Djuna was already prone to depression. After the breakup, he fell apart. The staff at their offices report that he and Tenumbra quarreled openly during the last few weeks, and that Djuna seemed to become more and more unglued."

"So," Ellery interjected, "you have motive. What about opportunity?"

"In spades. Both doctors occasionally saw patients in the office Tenumbra maintained at his apartment. So Djuna had his own electronic key to the apartment—easy access whenever he needed it. And the coroner sets the time of death for both Tenumbra and Djuna sometime between eight and ten Sunday night, completely consistent with a murder followed by a suicide. The stopped clock on the floor of Tenumbra's apartment indicates that he probably

DIGITIZED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

died around eight-thirty, which is also consistent with the autopsy findings. Finally, and this does sort of seem to cement it, Dr. Djuna did in fact kill himself. The coroner says that the knife cuts to his wrists, the knife found next to the bathtub with his fingerprints on it, and the absence of signs of any struggle all classically add up to suicide. As far as Stanley Santos figures it, that just about closes the book on the matter."

Ellery smiled. "But you are still troubled?"

"You bet. My book's still open. Or maybe I should say *your* books are still open, and lying on the apartment floor. I can't get that out of my head. What were they doing on the floor? And why did Tenumbra have that note from you crumpled in his hand?"

Harry shuffled through his briefcase until he located a piece of paper that he handed to Ellery.

"This is the list of the books—chronological order, based on publication date. I assume, from the other volumes in Tenumbra's library, that this is also how they were shelved on the bookcase."

Ellery scanned the neat row of titles, Nikki peering over his shoulder.

The Roman Hat Mystery
The French Powder Mystery
The Dutch Shoe Mystery
The Greek Coffin Mystery
The Egyptian Cross Mystery
The American Gun Mystery
The Siamese Twin Mystery
The Adventures of Ellery Queen
The Chinese Orange Mystery
The Spanish Cape Mystery
Halfway House
The Door Between
The Devil to Pay
The Four of Hearts
The Dragon's Teeth
The New Adventures of Ellery Queen
Calamity Town
There Was an Old Woman
The Murderer Is a Fox
The Case Book of Ellery Queen
Ten Days' Wonder
Cat of Many Tails
Double, Double
The Origin of Evil
Calendar of Crime
The King Is Dead
The Scarlet Letters

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Glass Village
QBI: Queen's Bureau of Investigation
Inspector Queen's Own Case
The Finishing Stroke
The Player on the Other Side
And on the Eighth Day
The Fourth Side of the Triangle
Queens Full
A Study in Terror
Face to Face
The House of Brass
Cop Out
QED: Queen's Experiments in Detection
The Last Woman in His Life
A Fine and Private Place

"Interesting," Ellery murmured, "all of the novels and all of the original short-story collections."

"But none of the farmed-out books, like those spy novels," Nikki added. "Who was that character? Tim Corrigan?"

"Mike McCall," sniffed Ellery, frowning. "I never should have let Fred and Manny talk me into those licensing arrangements. No, the only works here are the novels and collections that I actually wrote. I wonder, Harry, if I might hold on to this list?"

"Be my guest. And there's something else you might be interested in. We got this from the concierge." Harry pulled a second sheet from his briefcase. "This is the list of visitors to Tenumbra's apartment on Sunday and the times they checked in with the concierge."

Ellery took the paper and read: "Janiel Friedman, 7:15 P.M.; Tabitha DuVal, 7:47 P.M.; Rhonda St. Regis, 8:18 P.M."

This time it was Nikki who glanced back at Harry. "Well, Ms. Friedman and Ms. St. Regis we know. Who, pray tell, is Tabitha DuVal?"

Harry glanced in some embarrassment in the general direction of Nikki and then back toward Ellery. "Tabitha DuVal is an actress. She's only in her mid twenties and already has had a number of well-received shows on Broadway. But for our purposes she is, or more properly 'was,' apparently the last in that long string of women Tenumbra was intent on collecting."

Ellery whistled and then could not stifle a smile. "The last woman in his life, eh? But that volume's on the floor with all the rest," he mused as he eyed the list of books once again. He turned back to Harry. "So, in the course of one hour Tenumbra was visited by his former wife, the woman who jilted his partner for him, and another woman he was already pursuing?"

"Exactly. Tenumbra may have been brilliant, handsome, and rich. But he was also, it would appear, a thoroughgoing cad."

UPLOADED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Tell me," Ellery asked, "do we have a list indicating when these ladies left the West Park Towers?"

"No, and there's the rub. All the guests do is check in. After that they're free to leave whenever they want to, and there's no record of when they actually left the building."

"So any one of these three women could have still been in the building at the time of the murder. Well, Harry, as with the Missouri mule, you've gotten my attention. If you don't mind the company of someone who moves a little slower than you, I think maybe we should pay a visit to each of these ladies. But first I think we ought to set the stage just a bit. Nikki, I wonder if you could see if Elise Djuna is free for lunch today?"

Ellery, Nikki, and Harry were already seated in the dark restaurant on Amsterdam Avenue, tucked into the shadows of Columbia University, when Elise Djuna was shown to the table.

"How are you bearing up?" Ellery asked as she seated herself between Nikki and Harry.

"As well as can be expected, I suppose. Thanks so much, Ellery, for the flowers. Quinn would have appreciated them very much. And thanks to you, too, Harry." She smiled shyly at Harry Burke, seated to her left. "You have been most kind and patient with me."

Harry twisted uncomfortably in his seat. "I'm sorry about Santos. He can be awfully brusque sometimes. Everything has to be done yesterday for him."

"And I apologize as well," interjected Ellery, "because I am afraid that we also have some questions for you. But let's at least put them off until after lunch."

Later, over coffee, Ellery cleared his throat and said, "Elise, the police, well, at least Mr. Burke's partner Mr. Santos, have just about closed this case as a murder-suicide, and they may be right. But there are still some troubling aspects to the matter."

"How can I help?"

"Perhaps just with some background. As Nikki explained on the telephone, my interest, and I think I can speak for Mr. Burke as well, was piqued by the circumstances surrounding Dr. Tenumbra's death, the fact that he had a note from me in his hand when he died, and the matter of those books on the floor."

"Well, I suppose I can shed a little light at least about the books," Elise said. "When our father died, the books, and everything else, were left to us. Quinn and I were still students at Columbia. Not much was left in the estate after the restaurants were sold. We had to help finance our education by selling off all of Dad's personal belongings, including his library."

"Is that how your brother met Tenumbra?" Harry asked.

"No. Actually Quinn and I had both seen Jason professionally over the years. So we both knew him for a long time. Quinn had

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

episodes of depression going all the way back to his childhood. He worked out a lot of issues with Jason over the years. And the process was, I'm certain, what prompted Quinn to pursue a career in psychiatry. So when we needed to sell the library we already had an obvious potential purchaser. Jason prided himself on his detective collection and probably paid us a good deal more than the library would have sold for at auction. He was a big fan of yours, Ellery. He used to say that he wanted to own a first edition of every book that had your name on the spine."

"So both you and your brother were close to Dr. Tenumbra?" Ellery observed.

"Well, yes and no. Jason was a brilliant doctor, but not a very nice man. I have barely seen him over the years. Quinn admired Jason, and they practiced together, but Jason was a master at manipulation, and vain and lecherous to boot. No woman was safe from his advances unless she rejected them authoritatively and early on. That's what I did. After that he lost interest in me. But over the years I watched what he did to my brother.

"Quinn was always sort of timid and unsure of himself. That's why I thought it was so great when he and Rhonda became engaged. Don't get me wrong, Rhonda is a bit of an airhead, but she seemed fun and gregarious and she really brought Quinn out of his shell. It was disgusting when Jason began pursuing her. It might have been just another conquest for him, but it broke Quinn to lose Rhonda." Elise sighed. "I'm an English professor. I don't know anything at all about psychiatry. But I really thought that Quinn was stronger. I had no idea of the effect that breakup must have had on him until he tried to call me the night he died."

Ellery's eyes narrowed. "Did you speak to him that night?"

"No. I wasn't at home when he called. He left a voice message, though, around seven-thirty. He sounded distraught and said he needed to speak to me. I kept trying to call him back, but all I got was his answering machine."

Ellery reached across the table and patted Elise's hand. "One last thing, Elise. Did you know that at the time of his death Dr. Tenumbra was not only involved with Rhonda St. Regis but was also presumably pursuing someone else?" Ellery fumbled for a scrap of paper in his coat pocket. "A Ms. Tabitha DuVal, an actress on Broadway?"

"No, I didn't. But it hardly surprises me. Jason Tenumbra never changed. He was always chasing skirts." She squared her shoulders, as if trying to compose herself. After a few seconds she smiled and looked back across the table. "If that's all, Ellery, I'll thank you for lunch and be off."

"No thanks are necessary. If we need anything else, can I call you?"

"Certainly."

Elise pushed her chair away from the table. At the same time, a bit awkwardly, and blushing, Harry Burke stood too.

UNPUBLISHED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ellery and Nikki eyed the detective.

"Ms. Djuna," he stammered, "has agreed to show me a new collection in the rare-books section of the university library this afternoon."

Ellery smiled and waved dismissively. "We'll catch up with you later, Harry."

As the two left Nikki raised a quizzical eyebrow. Ellery smiled back, but all he said was, "Getting back to business, Ms. Porter, where does all of this leave us?"

"Well," Nikki responded, "this leaves us with the police theory, your books on the floor, your note, and three women, each of whom was in Tenumbra's apartment just before he was killed."

"Precisely," said Ellery. "We know how to proceed, don't we?"

Nikki hesitated a moment and then looked squarely into Ellery's eyes, her concern evident. "Do you think you're up to this?"

Ellery sighed, and his voice sounded older when he replied. "I really don't know. Let's just take it one step at a time."

The executive offices of the Friedman and Norr department-store chain, in the tradition of the 1930s, were still housed on the top floor of the flagship store in Manhattan. Ellery, Nikki, and Harry Burke waited in a sparsely furnished anteroom perched on straight-back chairs arranged around an ancient mahogany coffee table. A door across the room eventually swung open and a young woman in tailored linen announced that Ms. Friedman would see them now.

Janiel Friedman rose as they entered her corner office. Tall and slender, dressed in a light wool pinstripe business suit, she looked every bit the executive. In her mid fifties, hair long and wound back in a French twist, it was obvious that she meant to personify her reputation as the "queen of Forty-second Street." Gracefully, but with businesslike precision, Friedman gestured for Ellery, Nikki, and Harry to be seated in the chairs arrayed in front of her heavy mahogany desk.

"Gentlemen, madam, what can I do for you?" she asked as she lowered her frame into the high-backed desk chair.

It was Harry who began. "As you are aware, Ms. Friedman, the police are investigating the murder of your ex-husband, Dr. Jason Tenumbra."

"Actually," Friedman interrupted, "I am *not* aware of any such fact. First of all, I have already spoken with Detective Santos by telephone and I understand from him that the police investigation is concluded. Further," and her eyes rested on Ellery and Nikki, "I was not aware that even ongoing police investigations are conducted by task forces that include private citizens."

Harry bristled. "Whatever Detective Santos may have told you, I can assure you that this visit is part of the police investigation. My name is Harry Burke. I am a detective with the New York City

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Police Department. I am senior to Mr. Santos. This investigation is most decidedly still open, and I will either speak with you now or later before a grand jury. That choice is yours. And as to my companions, this is Mr. Ellery Queen and his assistant, Ms. Nikki Porter. Mr. Queen has a long-standing relationship with the NYPD but, in any event, the presence of others here today is my decision, not yours." Harry took a deep breath and forced a smile. "Now, may we continue?"

Friedman allowed herself a slight sniff, barely discernible. "All right, but please be brief. I have a very busy schedule."

"We need to know," continued Harry, "everything about your visit to Dr. Tenumbra's apartment on the night of his murder. According to the building's monitoring system, you signed in to visit Dr. Tenumbra at—" he fumbled for a piece of paper from his briefcase—"exactly seven-fifteen. We would be very interested in hearing what brought you to the West Park Towers that evening."

"I had an appointment with Jason. He was supposed to sign some legal documents."

Ellery raised an eyebrow. "From your use of the word 'supposed,' are we to understand that he did not in fact sign those papers?"

With a slight slump of her shoulders, Friedman nodded. She turned to face Ellery. "It seems quite irrelevant to what you are investigating, but I suppose it won't hurt to explain matters. Friedman and Norr is an old-line establishment. When I say 'old-line,' I don't mean old-fashioned, or conservative. What I mean is that in an era of conglomerate control of merchandising, we buck the trend. When you shop at Macy's or Lord and Taylor or Lazarus or Hecht's you are buying from stores with a common owner. And individual merchandising personalities exist in those stores only insofar as they serve the whims of the conglomerate owner.

"That has never been the case with Friedman and Norr, which always has been, and remains, privately owned. However, during the past few months we are, or I guess I should say have been, in the midst of a hostile takeover bid from Federated Department Stores."

"Pardon my ignorance," Ellery interjected, "but how could that be if the store is privately held?"

Janiel Friedman sighed. "The store was founded by my grandfather, Davarian Friedman, and his partner, Jacob Norr. My grandfather owned sixty percent of the stock; Norr owned forty percent. Those percentages have persisted to this day. The Norr stock is voted by a trust established for Jacob Norr's grandchildren. I am the sole heir of my grandfather's stock and I vote his shares. Or at least I did."

"You did?" Ellery asked.

"This is a little complicated," Friedman continued. "As part of my divorce settlement with Jason I was forced to agree that the earnings from half of my stock would be Jason's. He receives half

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of my income from the Friedman and Norr stores. I continue to vote the stock, except in certain limited exceptions."

"I sense," said Ellery, "that we are about to hear of one of those exceptions."

"Yes, I am afraid that you are. At the time of our divorce Jason's lawyer was concerned that this source of income for Jason could be eliminated by my simply selling off the shares. Since I intended to live by my deal, no matter how odious it was, it did not particularly concern me when Jason's attorney insisted on certain protective clauses in our divorce decree. One of those clauses provides that in the event of a proposed sale of Friedman and Norr, Jason would have the power to vote fifty percent of my stock.

"To make a long story short, the Norr trustees are enamored of Federated Department Stores' buyout offer. It's quick money for them—beach time and ski chalets. That's not my style. What I am doing at Friedman and Norr is continuing a legacy. Normally I wouldn't care what the Norr family wanted to do, since their forty-percent holdings are a minority interest."

"But not," Ellery murmured, "when there is the possibility of Jason Tenumbra voting fifty percent of your shares in favor of a different outcome."

"You have articulated the nub of my problem, Mr. Queen. I needed Jason's agreement to vote against the takeover. Typical of Jason, he agreed, but only when my lawyers also agreed to put one hundred thousand dollars on the table. My meeting with Jason was for the sole purpose of consummating that agreement. I arrived at his apartment with a cashier's check and with an agreement authorizing me to vote all of my shares in the takeover attempt notwithstanding the terms of the divorce decree. He was supposed to sign it that night."

"But a problem arose?"

"You might say that. When I arrived at Jason's apartment he told me that he had thought about it and decided he had sold out too cheaply. Something about a new Lamborghini that had caught his fancy. We argued, but he was insistent. The price, he announced, was now two hundred thousand dollars. He said that if he didn't get that amount he'd vote with the Norr heirs. I tried to reason with him. There was absolutely no reason for him to side with the Norrs. If the stock was sold to Federated I would get the proceeds of the sale, not him. And then his income from the store would cease. That was why he had his damned voting exception in the first place—to prevent something like that from happening. But Jason would hear none of that—he just smiled and shook his head as I talked. When I ran out of steam he said, 'Janiel, this isn't about logic, it's about extortion. I have something you need.' In the end, I swallowed my pride. I wasn't going to lose the stores for another measly hundred K."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This time it was Burke's turn to question her. "And that's why Dr. Tenumbra refused to sign the proxy agreement?"

"That's right. The bastard refused to sign because all I had with me was a cashier's check for one hundred thousand, not two hundred thousand. He wouldn't take my word that I would get him the rest the next day. So I left the apartment. In total, I couldn't have been there longer than fifteen minutes."

"I wonder," said Ellery, "whether you could tell us what you did afterwards?"

"Afterwards?"

"Yes. Did you in fact arrange for the additional hundred thousand dollars?"

Janiel Friedman looked uncomfortable. "Well, actually, I did nothing. You see, my visit with Jason was on Sunday. I couldn't very well call my attorney that night. So I waited until Monday morning. But on Monday, by midday, I had been informed of Jason's . . . demise. At that stage there was no reason to draw another check. The stock was again mine to vote."

Harry, Ellery, and Nikki sat quietly watching Janiel Friedman, who had lapsed into silence. After several seconds she spoke again. "Look, after I left Jason's apartment I went home, poured a couple of stiff drinks, cursed the bastard, and went to bed. I wouldn't kill anyone, not even that scumbag, for a mere two hundred thousand. That's the truth, and that is also all that I am saying. I wish all of you good fortune in your investigation, since good fortune, if it leads to the truth, can only remove me from your list of suspects. But for now, gentlemen, and Ms. Porter, I have business to attend to." With this Janiel Friedman pushed a button on the side of her desk and her assistant ushered the threesome out of the office.

The marquee over the Majestic Theatre several blocks from Times Square announced the imminent opening of *American Heroes,* a "bold and rollicking musical salute to the comic-book superheroes of the 1940s." Harry, Ellery, and Nikki walked through double doors and into the vestibule of the theater. A guard, lounging on a straight-back chair tipped back against the wall, rose and lumbered across the room intent on blocking their entrance. But once Harry explained that they had an appointment with Tabitha DuVal he gestured them through a double set of doors at the other end of the vestibule.

The dressing rooms were in a musty warren of halls, scenery, and stage equipment tucked behind the stage. Harry Burke tapped gently on a door that bore the name "DuVal," and the door swung slowly open on the force of his knuckles. Across the small room a slender blonde dressed in black tights and a cape sat in a director's chair hunkered over a well-annotated script. The young lady looked up.

"Mr. Burke?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes, Ms. DuVal. And this is Mr. Ellery Queen and Ms. Nikki Porter."

Tabitha DuVal flashed a quick smile across the room. "I'm sorry we are a little short on chairs," she continued, eyeing Ellery with some concern.

"We shall do just fine," Ellery assured her, resting on Nikki's arm.

"We don't want to take any more of your time than is necessary," Harry began. "I know that you are in rehearsals. But, as I explained on the telephone, we wanted to discuss certain matters relating to the death of Dr. Jason Tenumbra."

"I'll be glad to tell you anything I can, but I actually don't know much of anything. I mean, I was sorry about what happened to Jason, but I didn't even know him all that well."

"The apartment's records indicate," continued Harry, "that you visited Dr. Tenumbra's apartment at around seven forty-five the night of his death."

"I was there, all right. I sort of thought it was on business, but it kind of didn't end up that way. This musical we're working on, it's not fully capitalized. I mean, do you know what it takes to open a musical on Broadway? I've got a share in this one, as well as a role in it. I met Jason through the producer—he was interested, or so he said, in investing in the show. He was pretty well known among the cast and crew. Apparently he hung around the stage lights a lot. Anyway, he started showing up during our rehearsals. He was a really charming guy, ultra suave. Serious older hunk, if you know what I mean. He was talking about investing half a million dollars in the show, but then he kept kind of putting it off.

"The money is really important to us. During production of a show you end up burning a lot of funds before ticket revenue even kicks in. We're still two weeks from opening and we're basically busted. So I pushed Jason quite a bit and finally he asked me if I would like to stop by his apartment that Sunday. He promised that he would have a cashier's check for a hundred thousand as a first installment on his investment."

"Didn't a Sunday-night business appointment seem a little strange?" Nikki said incredulously.

Tabitha's smile receded a bit. "Look, I don't know what you're implying, but yeah, I guess I thought maybe it wasn't just business—sort of 'business plus,' maybe. Look, I'm single, unattached, and this is New York City. Jason could have been a great catch. I mean, the West Park Towers is to die for."

"Perhaps," observed Ellery.

"I didn't mean it that way. Anyway, I showed up at his apartment around a quarter to eight. He made drinks and immediately started hitting on me. I'd try to talk money, and he'd change the subject and finger my blouse. At first that was sort of all right with me. But then I was like, exactly where is this going? So I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pushed him away and said flat out, 'What about the investment?' And Jason comes right back and says he's not going to invest anything, he's got something else he's interested in. Some car. So I sort of blew up at him. Things were getting kind of tense, when all of a sudden the phone rings. Jason answered it, looked a little distressed, and then told me that the concierge desk had phoned to tell him that his fiancée was on her way up.

"Well, that set me off even more. No money for the show and a fiancée to boot. So, I'm still tearing into Jason, but all the while he's bustling me back toward the bedroom, telling me to play it cool. I told him that I wasn't doing anything wrong, he was the one playing all of the scams, and what was this about a fiancée anyway? I mean, where did that come from? But he just kept shushing me and pushing me back toward the bedroom. So, what could I do? He closed the door and I sat down on the bed and fumed.

"Well, I didn't end up waiting very long. I could hear this woman's voice in the living room screaming, really angry. A couple seconds later the bedroom door bursts open and in storms a really angry lady holding my glass in her hand. I guess she saw the two cocktail glasses in the living room and sort of added things up.

"Anyway, I'm like, 'How is all this happening to me?' and then I sort of blew up again and started yelling at her and at Jason for having gotten me into the middle of their own damned mess. The woman was clawing at me, but I got past her and stormed out the front door. That was the last time I saw either of them. But I can tell you this—when I left, Jason was fine. I mean, he was really going at it with this fiancée woman, but they were both very much alive."

"And you left the building immediately?" Ellery asked.

"What do you think? I'm going to, like, hang around in the hall to see what else can go wrong?"

There was a tap at the door to the dressing room and a turtlenecked man with a script under his arm said, "Your production number is up in five minutes, Tabitha." She turned toward Harry inquiringly.

"I suppose that's all for now anyway, Ms. DuVal, but we may need to speak with you again."

"Before you leave," Ellery said, "I wonder if you could just tell us a little about your new show."

Tabitha, already headed for the door, stopped and turned back toward Ellery. "Like I said, assuming we even make it to opening night, it's a musical, set in nineteen forty-four. The characters are all based on Marvel comic-book superheroes."

"And you play . . . ?"

"Sharon Shannon Kane."

"Ah," replied Ellery. "Sharon Kane. She was the 'Spider Queen,' wasn't she?"

❖ ❖ ❖

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rhonda St. Regis's apartment building, a lingering bastion of an earlier age, sat squarely in front of Central Park, defying encroachment with a dowager stubbornness that had calcified over seventy-five years of preeminence. Ellery therefore was not surprised when a uniformed attendant held the door of the elevator and then positioned the brass control lever to deposit them, not without some vertigo, on the thirty-ninth floor.

St. Regis's apartment was a study in elegance. Expansive views of Central Park accented by overstuffed wool and leather chairs and couches, Chippendale end table, bookcases, and deep Persian carpets conveyed the impression of a living space at home with itself.

And equally at home was Rhonda St. Regis, who greeted them in the vestibule and glided to what Ellery suspected was her accustomed throne, a wing chair situated in a corner where nothing in the room could escape her gaze. As a maid, dressed in a black-and-white uniform straight out of a *New Yorker* cartoon, placed a tray containing a teapot and four teacups and saucers on a walnut-and-brass coffee table, St. Regis smiled across the expanse of her domain.

"As I told you on the telephone, I don't know what, if anything, I can add to your investigation. I already explained to Mr. Santos that when I last saw Jason he was alive and kicking. Kicking, quite literally. But it is, as they say, your nickel, Mr. Burke."

"Well, it's really rather simple," Burke replied. "We know that you were one of three people who, according to building records, visited Dr. Tenumbra on the night of his death. We need to know everything about your visit."

Rhonda St. Regis eyed Burke. "Well," she began, "I arrived at Jason's apartment unannounced just after eight. I decided, on a whim, to surprise him. Jason and I had been seeing each other for some time, although it had been a clandestine relationship until the week before his death. But by the night of my visit we were no longer a secret. I reveled in the fact that I was free to just drop in on him, without going through all the shenanigans that had been the hallmark of our prior arrangements."

"The prior secretive nature of your meetings was, I take it," asked Ellery, "occasioned by your engagement to Dr. Quinn Djuna?"

The question hardly flustered St. Regis, who continued. "Quinn was a dear man; a dear but intense man. Looking back, everything just happened too fast between us. He was so certain that we were destined for each other that, I suppose, I sort of got caught up in the notion. But almost from the moment I accepted his proposal I had second thoughts. I realized that I had been carried to that point by momentum, but little else. And always, in the background, sort of hovering, there was Jason. He'd be there with a smile or a kind word. Very suave, self-assured, never pushy. Eventually I opened up to him about my feelings—or maybe lack of feelings would be more accurate—toward Quinn. He would respond

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with his own questions, you know, the way psychiatrists do, and as I continued to reach out to him, well, one thing just sort of led to another. Shared coffee progressed to shared dinners, shared evenings to shared nights. Each morning when I woke up with him there would be a wave of guilt, and I would resolve to try to work things out openly. But for weeks I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how I felt about Quinn, and I didn't really know how Jason felt about me.

"Then, several weeks ago, Jason proposed. He was so eloquent, he told me that he knew it was wrong, that he felt terrible about what he was doing to Quinn, but that he knew, just knew, that we were soulmates, that we couldn't allow the opportunity to live our lives together to slip through our fingers. Even then I had to take some time to think about his proposal. As you probably know, my family was quite wealthy. As an only child I inherited everything. As a result, I've always been careful in relationships. I have to be sure people are interested in me, not in my money. But Jason was so warm, so understanding. He seemed to have no interest in the St. Regis inheritance. And finally, I sort of looked inside myself and said, okay. This time it's real.

"Once I decided that, I knew I had to come clean with Quinn. So I met with him and as gently as I could I broke the news. He took it even worse than I had expected. He cried. He begged me not to leave him. I explained that it took two to make a relationship, that it couldn't be a one-way street. And then he started cursing Jason. I told him that it really wasn't Jason's fault, that if it had really been right between us there would never have been a Jason. But he wanted none of it. Jason told me afterward that Quinn just got worse and worse. The two of them were arguing in the office, in front of patients. Jason said they were going to have to break up their practice—we even talked of how I might advance him the necessary funds to pay off Quinn's share of the practice, buy him out, so that Jason could carry on on his own."

By now her voice was noticeably rising. "I'm telling you all of this because you might as well know my state of mind when I entered Jason's apartment that night. Finally, everything was right. I had found my life partner, everything was out in the open; I had come clean with Quinn, and we were moving toward a clean break in Quinn and Jason's partnership—a break that would have allowed each of them to begin rebuilding. I was absolutely at the top of my game until I saw that damned cocktail glass with lipstick on the rim in Jason's apartment. Then my world just crashed. What I had been guarding against all of my life had actually happened. The man I thought I was in love with was just another cad."

Ellery, Nikki, and Harry Burke watched silently as a flush crept up Rhonda St. Regis's neck.

"No one," she continued, "can get away with that with me. I stormed into his bedroom, and there's this young blond wisp of a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing sitting on the edge of the bed, like she belongs. And then, can you believe this, *she* starts yelling at *me*. I tried to grab her, but she bolted for the door. I was calling Jason all of the ugly names I could think of, and through all of it he's whining, you know, 'I can explain, I can explain.' Finally I just yelled, 'You bastard, explain this.' Then I kneed him in the groin and stomped out of the apartment.

"That's it. That's the full story. When I last saw Jason Tenumbra he was lying on his study floor, surrounded by his damn artwork and damn books, grabbing his damn crotch and howling. He might not have been feeling that great but he sure as hell wasn't dead."

As the threesome entered the elevator, having left behind a still-fuming Rhonda St. Regis, Harry's cell phone rang. When Harry finished the call he turned to Ellery. "That was Santos. He wants us to meet him as soon as we can at Tenumbra's apartment. He has something to show us. He'll explain when he sees us at the apartment."

Jason Tenumbra's apartment was in the midst of being cleaned and straightened when Nikki, Ellery, and Harry were escorted back into the study by Stanley Santos, who wore a smile that Ellery took for smug. Arranged on the glass desk, now sparkling clean, were several items. Santos stopped at the desk and turned around to face the others.

"Mr. Queen, during the last few weeks I've read a few of your books. They were okay for their time. Pretty good stuff. And after I read a few, I decided that you might enjoy hearing the solution to this case at the scene of the crime. That's something I could picture you doing. Of course, you might have filled the room full of possible culprits first. I'll dispense with that since, as I told you from the beginning, there is no surprise ending here.

"What I did want to demonstrate to my partner, and to you," he eyed Ellery, "is that as good as your so-called deductive approach used to be, there just isn't much need for it anymore. While you folks were tromping about town interviewing everyone you could think of, I did what modern detectives do. I gathered the physical evidence, sent it off to the lab, and waited for the results. And the results, my friends, tell the whole story. We live in an absolutely marvelous technological age."

Santos turned to the table and, with a flourish, picked up a small leather case. "Exhibit One," he said, passing the case to Harry Burke. "This is a set of scalpels that we located in Dr. Djuna's apartment. Look at the inscription embossed on the inside cover."

Harry opened the box and read, "To Quinn, Best wishes as you embark into the field of medicine. Jason Tenumbra."

"That box was kept in a small display cabinet in Djuna's living room. And look again—see anything missing?"

The box contained four scalpels of varying sizes. A spot that could have held a fifth was empty.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Exhibit Two," Santos continued, and picked up a scalpel from the glass desktop. "The murder weapon. Not only does it fit precisely into the open space in the carrying box," and Santos demonstrated, "it also is a precise match to the other four scalpels. Same manufacturer, same metal alloy. The boys in the lab verified it and we were even able to trace it back to the manufacturer on the Internet using the serial number on the underside of the box. So, what do we know? We know that the weapon that murdered Dr. Tenumbra was a knife he had given to Dr. Djuna. Surprise, surprise, surprise!"

Santos treated them to another smile before turning back to the desk. He next picked up a plastic card the size of a credit card and presented this to Harry Burke.

"Exhibit Three, the magnetic entry card that gave Dr. Djuna uninhibited access to Dr. Tenumbra's apartment. The card was left in the middle of Dr. Djuna's desk in his apartment. So there was no reason to worry about the names on the concierge's list. With this card, Quinn Djuna could bypass the list completely. And, what's this?" Santos asked in feigned surprise. "Why, there seems to be a bloodstain on the back of the card.

"So, let's see, Mr. Queen. What do we have? We have motive—Dr. Djuna had been jilted by his fiancée after he had been cuckolded by his partner. We have opportunity—Dr. Djuna had free access to the apartment with that bloodstained card. And we have the means—Dr. Djuna's own scalpel, found at the scene of the crime."

"Impressive," murmured Ellery.

"Oh, you haven't heard anything yet," Santos continued. "I have saved the best, the very best, for last." He turned back to the desk and picked up the final object—a typed report held together by a black clip. "This is the forensics report on the blood at the scene of the crime. Actually, it's two reports, because it turned out there were two different blood types on the floor of the study."

Santos gestured back to the desk. "The blood on the desk matched Tenumbra's blood. Plain and simple." Santos turned back to the front of the desk. "But the blood out there," he gestured toward the door, "and the blood we found in the room on the carpet, as well as that smudge of blood on the electronic entry card? That wasn't Tenumbra's blood at all. It seems that the murderer must have been cut during the struggle. And there were very good samples of that second blood type. So, what can I tell you about it?

"Let me spare you from plowing through a long report. We'll start with some general observations, and then we will move to the specifics. Now, as you know, even blood work can't positively identify who the blood came from. All that DNA analysis can do is to establish the odds, and they're usually astronomical, that the blood came from a particular person. But there is one thing, one very special thing, that any blood test can tell you with absolute certainty. It can tell you the sex of the person who produced that blood. All

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

male blood has an X and a Y chromosome. Not so with the ladies," said Santos, and winked at Nikki. "The ladies carry only two X's.

"I bet you can see this one coming," he continued, smiling patronizingly at Ellery. "The blood in front of the desk and the blood on the entry card, in other words, the blood that was not Tenumbra's, was the blood of a male. Shows up clear in the analysis—X's and Y's all over the place. Of course, all that does is rule out about fifty percent of the population as the murderer. But guess what? Surprise again! It rules out *everyone* you three have been wasting your time on this past week—every one of those ladies. None of them could have done it. It's scientifically impossible.

"But, as I said, we can also move from the general to the specific. We know more than the fact that the murderer was a man. The test also shows that the blood in front of the desk and on the entry card, again, the blood that is not Tenumbra's, is in fact a perfect match to Dr. Quinn Djuna—the murderer, and then, the suicide. Just like I told you from the start."

"Very impressive," Ellery repeated, now in a tired voice.

Harry, however, still looked unconvinced. "What about the books?" he said.

"Will you forget about the damned books?" Santos exploded. "This is not about the books. They don't matter."

Ellery stared across the room and his eyes brightened. "I see," he said, "that the volumes have been returned to the bookcase."

"Yeah," replied Santos. "But not for long. It seems that while Tenumbra brought in a lot of money, he spent a lot more. Recipe for fiscal disaster. Apparently he died in the red both actually and metaphorically. The family has scheduled an auction here to sell off his art and his library. They've been pushing us to get the place back in order before the high rollers show up."

Ellery pushed himself to his feet, his ancient joints protesting. Not for the first time he wished that he could exercise over his body the control he still wielded over his mind. Haltingly, Ellery Queen walked across the room to the wall of books. They were, as he remembered them, tightly shelved, spine to spine. He fingered the volumes of Catherine Aird at the beginning of the collection. Then he walked stiffly to the end of the library to examine the Emile Zola volumes that ended the collection tight against a book rest. Ellery straightened, returned to the middle of the collection, and stared at his own volumes. His eyes widened and he gasped. Between the end of the Queen collection and the beginning of the volumes of Ruth Rendell there was a gap of approximately 8 inches of blank shelf.

"Thank God," Ellery whispered, his voice no longer tired. "The light. It hasn't failed." Ellery laughed out loud, and across the room Nikki, Harry Burke, and Santos turned to look at him, uncomprehending.

"Of course," Ellery marveled, and he laughed, almost giddily

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

now. "It's Poe! Poe had the answer all along!"

Part 3: An After-Dinner Chat

The dinner dishes in the Queen apartment had been cleared, and Ellery, Nikki, Harry Burke, and Elise Djuna sat back in their chairs over steaming cups of coffee. With some exasperation Harry interrupted what had been light, if strained, after-dinner conversation.

"Look, Ellery. That was a great dinner, but I ended up suffering through it. You've been playing coy ever since we left Tenumbra's apartment yesterday. You promised to let us in on that epiphany you had there, and I, for one, am on the edge of my seat. So what did you figure out?"

"I admit," Ellery responded, "that I have been taking my old sweet time on this. As I've grown older I've come to feel that with knowledge comes responsibility, and to act responsibly one sometimes needs to step back and ponder a little.

"Well, where to begin? I used to start out, as Detective Santos noted, by gathering all of the suspects together. But as I grew older I found that sometimes managing all of those people can be a chore in itself, and one that gets in the way of clean explication. Sometimes it is better just to talk the matter through with friends.

"The physical evidence summarized yesterday by Mr. Santos is impressive. And we must not ignore it. But what always, I believe, troubled my old friend Harry was the pile of books on the floor. Certainly that's what coaxed me into the fray.

"The books had to have been swept to the floor either by Dr. Tenumbra—and due to the absence of blood on the volumes he'd've had to do this before he was stabbed—or by the murderer. And the meaning of the pile of books varies based on who put them there. If Tenumbra left the books on the floor, presumably he did so to identify his murderer, but if the murderer moved the books it would have been for a different reason, no doubt to misdirect our attention.

"Let's first assume that the books were moved by Tenumbra. What could he have been trying to tell us? This is always a problem with dying messages: They are all too often murky. Was Tenumbra trying to tell us that the murderer was somehow associated with the word "queen"? If so, this is no help. Every single person who had access, or may have had access, to Tenumbra's apartment that night has some obscure connection to that word. Janiel Friedman is proud to be known as the merchandising 'queen' of Forty-second Street—the phrase is even used in advertising for the Friedman and Norr chain. Tabitha DuVal is about to appear on Broadway as a character who, to avenge injustice, becomes the 'Spider Queen.' And Rhonda St. Regis? Well, 'Regis' derives from the Latin *'regina,'* literally, 'queen.' And, of course, Quinn Djuna is easily linked to the Queen books that were originally his father's.

"These clues leave us with nothing. If each suspect can be identi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fied by at least one such obscure reference to 'queen,' how could Tenumbra have concluded that a pile of my books would predictably lead us to the actual culprit? The answer is that he could not.

"Equally puzzling is why *all* of the books were removed to the floor. Wouldn't just one book convey the same message, whatever it is? I must admit that until yesterday none of this made any sense to me."

"So what changed yesterday?" Harry asked.

"I'll come to that. But first let's focus for just a minute on the books themselves. I think we can learn a great deal about Tenumbra from those volumes, and from other things we know."

"I'm puzzled now," Nikki interjected. "We already know that the Queen books were the volumes you sent to Elise and Quinn's father over the years. If that library was acquired, in total, by Tenumbra, how can it tell us anything about *him?*"

"It is true that Tenumbra acquired Djuna's library," Ellery replied. "But remember that Djuna only had an interest in the Queen books in which Dad or I appeared, and those are the only books I sent to him. They were all on the floor, but there were two other volumes there as well: *The Glass Village* and *Cop Out.* While I wrote those books, they were never in Djuna's library. Why? Because Dad and I weren't characters in either of them. So Tenumbra must have acquired those two first editions elsewhere.

"And we also know that Tenumbra had contacted me to find out if I would be interested in parting with copies of my nonfiction volumes, books that were not yet in his library. Finally, we know that Tenumbra was completely uninterested—and in this regard I applaud his taste—in any of the 'farmed out' Queen volumes: the Mike McCall and Tim Corrigan works, and other paperbacks that bore my name but that I really had nothing to do with."

"I don't see where this gets us if all of the books that he had were in fact on the floor," Harry groused. "And what does this have to do with all of your mutterings about Poe?"

"It has everything to do with Poe. We know from Poe that the best place to hide a book is on a bookcase. This is just the obverse. The best way to hide the absence of a book is by emptying a bookcase."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Look, Ellery, I'm trying to stay with you on this, but it's making no sense at all. Absence of what book? All of your books, except the ones you wouldn't sell to Tenumbra, were on the floor. You already said that."

"No. What I said was that Tenumbra was a collector of books that I had written, and that this was true regardless of whether Dad and I were characters in the books. All of that I knew, but it told me nothing until yesterday when I saw, for the first time, my books *replaced* on the bookcase in Tenumbra's study. As you all observed, the books by other authors were shelved tightly, ending with a bookend after the last Zola volume. But when the Queen library was reshelved, in the same space it previously occupied, there was a blank space

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of approximately eight inches after the last Queen volume.

"When I saw that, I understood everything. The books on the floor could not be the dying message. They were red herrings, misdirecting us not *toward* someone, but *away* from something. The real dying clue, what the murderer couldn't allow us to find, was no longer there."

Ellery gazed out at three sets of eyes that only returned silent stares. He sighed again. "This may become a little clearer if we examine the next set of books in Tenumbra's collection.

"What next set of books?" Harry asked in exasperation.

"The books that, alphabetically, immediately follow the Queen collection—the first editions of Ruth Rendell's works. Tell me, Harry, did you notice anything telling about those volumes?"

"No. And I am so confused now that I'm just going to shut up and let you work this through to the end."

"And we are almost there," Ellery replied. "The Ruth Rendell books are informative because *all* of her works are there. By this, I mean all of the books she authored, both under the name 'Ruth Rendell' and under her nom de plume, 'Barbara Vine.' And the Vine books are shelved together with the rest of Rendell's works.

"When I saw that, it was immediately clear what must have happened, particularly in light of what Mr. Santos had just told us. Not only did I know which of my own volumes were missing, I also knew which of those particular volumes Tenumbra must have grasped and pulled from the shelf while grabbing my note to him in his other hand. Tenumbra left a clue to the identity of his murderer and at the same time did his best to ensure that I would be called upon to interpret his dying message."

Ellery gazed across the room at his guests. "There were only four fiction works that I wrote that were not on the floor of Tenumbra's apartment—the books I wrote under the pseudonym 'Barnaby Ross.'"

Ellery was quiet for a moment. His eyes now looked as old as his years, and sadder. "I think you expected this, Elise."

Silently, Elise Djuna nodded, and at the same time pulled two volumes from her bag: *The Tragedy of X* and *The Tragedy of Y.* Both volumes were stained with blood, and on the cover of the first volume, roughly sketched in the blood of the dying Jason Tenumbra, was an "O" with a cross at the bottom. "I expected you'd figure it out, Ellery," she said. "So I brought the books with me. I have no interest in prolonging this."

"Wait a minute," said Harry, knowledge and anger welling up in equal parts. "I don't like where this is headed. But in any event, you're wrong. Remember the DNA analysis? Elise can't have had anything to do with this."

"Of course I remember the DNA analysis," Ellery replied. "But unfortunately DNA has everything to do with this. Blood is, in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fact, the key."

Ellery locked eyes with Elise. "What was it? Leukemia? Hodgkin's?"

In a small and resigned voice Elise answered, "Leukemia."

Now it was Nikki's turn to be perplexed. "Ellery, I am lost. What is this all about?"

"Like everything else in this case, it's about blood, blood and books," Ellery sighed. "We knew from the very first day that both Elise and Quinn had previously been patients of Dr. Tenumbra. Elise told us that. And we also knew, again from Elise's own words, when she was explaining the nature of Quinn's recurring bouts with depression, that she herself was utterly unfamiliar with psychiatry—something that no one who had personally struggled through psychiatric analysis would have said. Therefore her consultations with Dr. Tenumbra must have had nothing to do with psychiatry.

"But we also know that Tenumbra at some point had another specialty—oncology. When Elise told us that Quinn saved her life, she meant it literally. Quinn saved her with his blood. Djuna and his wife adopted Elise and Quinn, but Quinn was, in fact, your fraternal twin, wasn't he, Elise?"

Elise nodded.

"How could you have known that, and why would it matter?" Nikki asked.

"The best and most reliable cure for leukemia, or for Hodgkin's disease, involves a bone-marrow transplant, and the best match for a donor transplant," Ellery continued, "is, predictably, a sibling. In order to effect a remission in those circumstances, the recipient's blood and bone marrow is literally eliminated through radiation treatment. Bone marrow from the host, in this case Quinn, is injected. The transferred marrow then begins producing blood, blood that eventually replaces the recipient's blood. And the new blood cells are identical, in all respects, to those of the donor. Elise, in fact, owes her life to the fact that she has the blood—and the identical blood DNA—of her brother, Quinn. While Santos was correct that the blood of a female would have only X chromosomes, Elise's veins pulse with Quinn's blood. Blood that carries, like that of all males, both an X and a Y chromosome.

"And that is what Dr. Tenumbra, her treating physician, knew and tried to tell us. He no doubt saw that Elise was bleeding during the attack and in his dying moments he grabbed those two volumes and drew on the cover of one the universal medical symbol for 'woman.' Literally, he was telling us that while the second blood type we would find in the apartment was that of a man—with both X and Y chromosomes—the murderer was, in fact, a woman. And a woman with X and Y chromosomes. Like most dying messages, this one had some obscurity to it. But Tenumbra ensured that that obscurity would be unraveled by also grasping

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

my note in his dying grip. He knew that dying messages have always been a specialty of mine."

"But then why did Quinn take his own life?" Nikki asked.

"Quinn took his life in sorrow over the breakup of his engagement," Ellery answered. "But what we did not realize earlier was that Quinn's suicide must have preceded Dr. Tenumbra's murder."

"How can you say that when the coroner could only establish that the two men were killed during the same two-hour period?" Harry Burke asked, and Ellery noted that he was now holding Elise's quivering hand.

"Harry, we know it, again, because of the blood. We assumed from the beginning that the clock on the floor of Tenumbra's study, the one frozen at eight-thirty, likely resulted from Tenumbra tripping on the clock's electrical cord. But now, as Mr. Santos has so conclusively demonstrated, we know that is not possible. No one in Tenumbra's condition could have reached the clock without leaving a blood trail. And yet we know now that all of the blood found on that side of the desk was in fact that of the murderer. So it was the murderer who unplugged the clock. And we also know," Ellery continued, "that this was a deliberate, not an accidental act."

Ellery glanced around the room and again was met only by stares.

"We know this," he sighed, "because the murderer obviously had the time to arrange the other aspects of the room. If there was time to take the Barnaby Ross volumes, and to sweep the rest of the Queen volumes to the floor, there was also time to right the clock—that is, unless the murderer *wanted* us to find the clock on the floor, to misdirect us as to the time of the killing.

"I imagine," and Ellery looked toward Elise, "it went something like this: You stabbed Tenumbra. Perhaps as he lay mortally wounded you even taunted him a bit, explaining that you were free to kill him without fear, that you would never be caught since the blood evidence you were leaving behind would, upon analysis, identify your brother as the killer. Assuming Tenumbra was dead or dying, you left the room, probably to clean up. When you returned you found Tenumbra, now dead, sprawled on his desk. But, no doubt to your horror, you also saw that he had those two Barnaby Ross volumes grasped in his bloody hand. Worse yet, he had managed to scrawl yet another clue, the universal medical sign for 'woman,' on the front of one volume.

"You are your father's child. You grasped immediately that this clue, if deciphered, would identify you as the murderer. So what did you do? You pulled from the bookcase the other books I wrote under the pseudonym Barnaby Ross—*The Tragedy of Z* and *Drury Lane's Last Case*—and set them aside, to remove from the apartment along with the books in Tenumbra's grasp. Then you swept the remaining Queen volumes to the floor in order to obscure what was missing from the collection. Finally, you pulled the cord of the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clock from the wall and set the dial back, probably by an hour—thus indicating that Tenumbra's death occurred earlier than it in fact did. What you didn't find was my note to Tenumbra, clasped almost invisibly in his other hand.

"But even if that is not precisely how it happened, we know that Quinn's death had to have preceded Tenumbra's. Elise, it was obvious that your brother meant everything to you. You've told us as much in your words as in your actions. You would never have framed him with his own blood, with the blood that he donated to you to save your own life, had he not already been dead. In fact, you killed Tenumbra only *because* your brother was dead, a fact that you discovered yourself when, unable to reach Quinn by phone, you went to his apartment, used the same key you used the next day to let us in, and found his body.

"And then, I suppose, the rest just fell into place. You took Quinn's scalpel and his entry card for Tenumbra's apartment and proceeded to exact revenge. Afterwards you returned Quinn's entry card to his apartment, and then simply waited for the police to discover the two bodies, the latter one with your own assistance, and accompanied by, I should add, a most convincing scream.

"You were shocked to see me outside Quinn's apartment. But that shock did not result simply from the fact that we had not seen each other in years. It also, I am sure, was a reaction of fear. You and your family knew my work even better than Tenumbra did. You knew that my life has been dedicated to unraveling perplexities, and particularly dying messages. You knew, in short, that I might prevail where the police would not. That even with the Barnaby Ross books removed, I might still figure out what that pile of books was all about. In fact, that's why you suggested early on that Tenumbra wanted to acquire, in your words, every book that *had my name on the spine.*

"That statement was an attempted misdirection, and something we knew was not true as soon as the books were reshelved."

Still clasping Harry Burke's hand, Elise Djuna looked up. "You're right, Ellery. And you are also right that, when I saw you standing in the lobby of Quinn's apartment, I feared you would eventually piece this together."

She turned to Harry and tears began to form in her eyes. "Harry, I'm so sorry to involve you in this. I had hoped against hope that I could pull this off. It didn't matter so much before. Then it was only me. I could have faced the future—not easily, but satisfied that what I did was completely justified. It's completely different now that I've found you. I'm just so sorry."

Elise brushed a tear from her cheek, and looked across the room at Ellery. "I knew it would come to this, and I'm resigned. That's why I brought along the books. I was willing to play the game of logic with you, Ellery, but I'm not about to continue fighting after checkmate."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ellery continued to stare across the room. "There is one thing that I am still curious about. I know that you had Quinn's entry card, but how did you manage to approach Tenumbra in his own apartment?"

"That was easy," Elise replied. "I called Jason after I discovered Quinn's body and told him I was finally willing to part with some books from my own collection. He asked me to drop by around nine. He actually invited me back to the library." From her purse Elise pulled three more volumes: *The Detective Short Story; Queen's Quorum: A History of the Detective-Crime Short Story;* and *In the Queen's Parlor.* "When Jason thought I was willing to sell those books he greeted me with open arms."

Ellery shook his head in amazement. "Of course. The same books he tried to acquire from me."

Elise squared her shoulders and looked directly into Ellery's eyes. "I guess it's time for you to call the police."

Ellery took a deep breath and squared his own ageing shoulders. "As I told Harry yesterday," he finally said, "I needed to think this matter through for a while. I stewed over it all day.

"In my earlier years I observed often that though I might have solved a crime, it was not for me to judge whether punishment was deserved. Issues of justice, I always thought, were for the criminal justice system, not the detective. But I am older now. Maybe not wiser, but most certainly older."

Ellery rose shakily. "Thank you for coming tonight, Elise. I'm sorry for what you've been through." Ellery reached across the table for her other hand. "I always greatly admired your father."

Then he turned to Burke. "As for you, Harry, you're a member of the NYPD and you can do as you wish, but personally I remain retired. I'm not calling anyone."

"It's funny you should put it that way, Ellery," Harry replied. "I took early retirement only this morning."

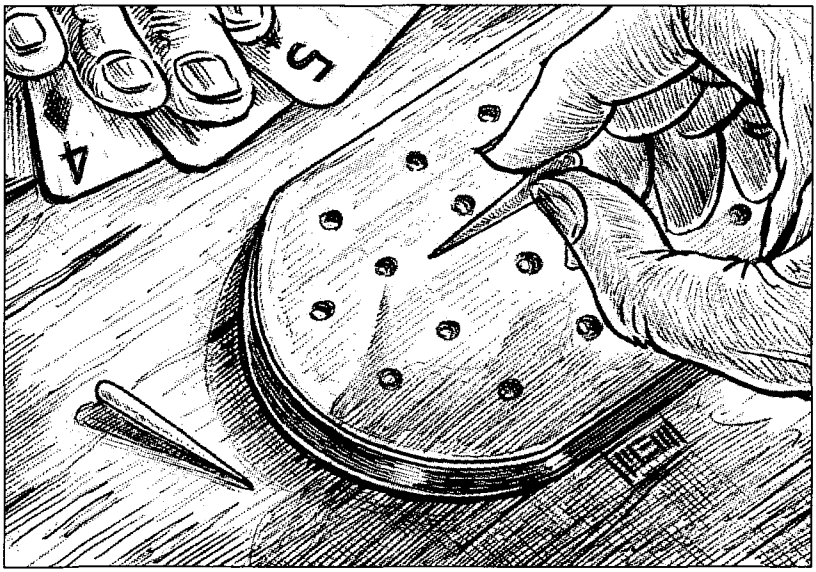
Ellery eased back into his chair, stretched ancient joints, and smiled. "You know, Nikki, I think we should cap off this evening with some single malt on the rocks. And, perhaps . . ." Ellery's eyes glanced across the room toward the humidor, "perhaps I'll even have a nice evening pipe."

"I think," responded Nikki, "that we can do the single malt, but after that you're going to bed."

Ellery Queen's ancient gray eyes narrowed in mock anger. "You know, Ms. Porter, you are the latest in what is now a long line of hard-nosed and obstinate women. This all started with your grandmother—first she invented her own name, then she refused to give it up, and then she passed it along to two more generations of self-assured, stubborn redheads. Who do you think you are to deny me a well-deserved evening pipe?"

"I know precisely who I am," Nikki responded. "And as I said, after that drink it will be time for bed, Grandfather." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Mark Evan Walker

THEY NEVER LISTEN

by Michael Z. Lewin

"A Butcombe for you," Garth said as he set two pints down on the pub table, "and a Butcombe for me." He slid into his seat and settled himself.

Annette lifted her beer. "Cheers, m'dear."

"Cheers." They clinked glasses and drank. "Ooh, that's good," Garth said.

"Couldn't agree more." Annette put her glass down and placed a pack of cards in front of him. "Mugs away," she said.

Garth shuffled the cards a few times and offered the pack for Annette to cut. "You have a good memory."

"You mean that I won the last one? Remembering that for two whole days . . . *So* impressive."

He dealt. "A good memory considering your age."

"Charming."

They picked up their hands, discarded to Garth's crib, and played as they talked and drank. "So," Annette asked, "have you checked how your girl's doing?"

Garth sucked on a corner of his mouth. "I talked to her last night." He played a card and pegged two points.

"From your tone it doesn't sound like there's been much progress.

©2007 by Michael Z. Lewin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Or do I have it wrong?"

"You have it right. I made sure to time it so that we could have a decent talk. I waited till she had the twins in bed and till *he* had gone out. I even called the pizza place and had them deliver on my credit card, so she wouldn't have the cooking and cleaning-up." Garth put down a jack. "Twenty-nine."

"Go. You can do that with pizza even if you don't live in the same city?" Annette asked.

"Even if you live in a different country, I expect." Garth pegged a point. "As long as you give them your credit card, Bob's your uncle."

"And pizza's your pleasure." She played a seven.

He smiled. Then paired her seven and pegged two more points. "Come on, girl. Make an effort."

Annette said nothing as she put a third seven down. That scored her six points and put her in the lead. "You were saying?"

"I was saying you're getting crafty in your old age."

"Charming."

"Anyroad, Tracey and I went through it all again. There are plenty of places she could get help. At a support group they have over there. Or I could bring her and the kids back here. I expect *you'd* help her, though I didn't say it. But she still won't leave him. Because of the twins, she says."

"You think there's really some spark left in it for her?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't." They scored their hands and Garth's crib and then Annette took the cards to shuffle for the next hand. "To tell you the truth, I think she's *so* worn down by it all that she just parrots back the 'I know he loves me, I believe him when he says he'll never do it again' crap because she's too exhausted, emotionally and physically, to say anything else. Not because she really believes it anymore."

"I don't suppose you could give her a holiday, to get her away from him for a while?" Annette said. Garth cut and she began to deal.

"*He'd* take the holiday from her before she got to use it."

"He'd go away?" Annette was surprised. "That would give her the same break, wouldn't it?"

"You want me to send him on holiday? Where to? The Maldives?"

"Slough? Or on safari where he might get eaten by a lion?"

"What I meant was that he'd take the tickets or whatever from her and cash them in."

We have a pair of stories by Michael Z. Lewin this month, and though each could stand on its own, they are much better read together as leading up to and following the same criminal undertaking. Mr. Lewin is a longtime *EQMM* contributor and the author of the acclaimed Albert Samson mysteries. For the latest book in that series see *Eye Opener* (Five Star).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And—"

"Exactly. And then take it out on her when that money was gone because there wasn't any more. It really is hopeless. A bit like this hand." Garth discarded to Annette's crib.

"Don't think you can flannel me like that," she said. "As soon as you start complaining about your hand, I look out for fives."

"Am I so transparent?"

"And coy now. You're not as green as you're compost-looking." She revealed the turn-up card, a six.

"Such sweet things you say to me." He put down a four. "And what about *your* boy?"

"I never even get to talk to him." She played a seven, making the total twenty-two. "At least not when *she*—"

"The Beast?" Garth put down a five.

Annette raised her eyebrows at the five. "I predicted you'd have a five, didn't I? Go. At least not when *she* isn't standing by his shoulder."

Garth played yet another four, making the total thirty-one, and pegged two more.

"*She,* or rather *It,* controls everything he does. *It* answers the phone and won't leave him alone to talk when she does put him on. Or *It* says he isn't there when I *know* she's lying. And *It* tells him they can't have an answering machine. I expect *It* even opens his post." Annette put down her last cards, a pair of eights, taking two for the pair and one for the last card of the hand.

"A total-control thing." Garth peered at her cards. "Wow. That's a hand and a half you have there." Annette's hand was an exceptional twenty-four points.

"Just as well, given the 'hopeless' hand you have."

Garth's three fours, a five, combined with the turn-up six, scored him twenty-one points. Also exceptional, when an average cribbage hand scores about eight. "But I was only holding six before the turn-up. I wasn't flannelling you. As if I would do such a thing. *Shame.*"

"The turn-up helped us both." Annette frowned. "I don't remember the last time we had twenty-plus facing twenty-plus."

"Nor I," Garth said.

"And aren't they pretty?"

"This is such an odd, fascinating game. Like life. And yours are the nicer because they're all red."

"It's good when all the cards in a hand matter. When a hand doesn't increase the amount of entropy in the world."

"One for the notebook," Garth said.

Annette turned over her crib, which contained four more points, while Garth wrote the scores and the date down in a notebook he carried. "Memorable."

"Or would be if we could remember it without having it written down."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When did you begin to trust your memory less, Nettie?"

"I doubt it *really* set in when I turned sixty, but it felt that way."

"As late as that? You're lucky, then."

"There's something about landmark birthdays."

"They're markers, aren't they? To make you review where you are."

"And remind you that there's a time-limit on where you're going."

"That there's a time-limit to *everything,*" Garth said.

"But it's more than a control thing," Annette said as he gathered the cards.

"What is?"

"The Beast's keeping Darren from talking to me, from having contact with me. She's not only controlling his present, she's trying to rebuild his personality, from the ground up. So what he is suits her, no matter what suits him."

"Did you manage to talk with him at all?"

"Yes, but only for a few minutes, and she was in the room. Even to get that much I had to say it was important."

"It is. It was." Garth paused before offering the pack for a cut.

"Yes," Annette said.

"And?"

"When I began to go through what's been happening to him, he stopped me. He just blanks out that she's breaking down his personality, and using tools on him that are like they do in cults. I bet, just *bet,* that she'll have a baby and nail him to the home to look after it."

"You want to be a grandmother, though, don't you?"

"But not of something with fins and webbed feet and horns and red, glowing eyes."

Garth smiled.

"With all Darren's qualifications it's crazy. He should be building a career."

"I *am* sorry, Nettie. You know that."

"Why don't they listen, Gar? *Why* don't they? Is it that they think we're so flaming clueless?"

Garth shrugged. "Who knows what they think?"

"Or that we have some ulterior motive? For crying out loud, we're not *stupid.* Plus, we've learned things over the years. We know how the world works. Better than we bloody did at their ages."

"Better than *they* do, at their ages."

"That's for sure."

Garth offered the cards. Annette cut them. He dealt.

"I'd do *anything* for that boy," Annette said.

"I know."

"As you would for your Tracey."

"As we're about to prove," Garth said. He offered the pack for the second cut. "I take it that's what we're talking about now."

Annette made the cut but rested her hands on the cards before

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her without turning them over. "We *did* say."

"Put up or shut up," Garth said.

Annette took her cards. "Well, I'm sure as hell not going to shut up."

"That'll be the day," Garth said with a laugh. He looked at his own cards. "The sublime to the ridiculous."

"I'm hearing flannel again," Annette said.

"Well, what do you *expect* me to do? *Accept* the hand I'm dealt and shut up about it? *Do* nothing about it?"

She looked at him. There was passion in his voice.

"Because that's not the kind of guy I am."

"And it's not the kind of gal I am either."

"So it begins," Garth said.

"We need to be careful."

"You're not wrong there."

"Because it's not just us. Can you imagine what *they'd* say?"

"Or think of us. No, care is very important."

"But we also can't hang about. Suppose The Beast does get him to knock her up."

"We must work it all through. Alibis, everything."

"Better than having an alibi is not to be suspected."

"I'll drink to that," Garth said.

They clinked glasses and fixed eyes on each other as they drank.

"Cheers," Annette said.

"I've been thinking hit-and-run for your Darren's Beast," Garth said. "Go over there. Watch her movements for a week or two. Check her routine."

"Your Tracey's 'beast' won't be so hard. Pub to bookie to house. But I'll go there and check out his routines anyway."

"Thank you."

"Hit-and-run for him too, do you think?"

"I prefer a mugging," Garth said. "With a baseball bat."

"Oh?"

"I *so* want to hit him, like he's hit Tracey."

"It's your poetic-justice side. Only it'll be two bats. And two in the car that does for *her.* Or rather, *It.*"

"Which beast first?"

"I don't want to be greedy," Annette said, "but I'd say we should do *It* first, while the nights are still long. If we can hit her and run at night, there'll be less likelihood of anyone seeing clearly."

"Though each extra day *does* mean there's more chance that Tracey . . ."

"I know, Gar." Annette put a hand on his wrist. "But we're *not* going to hang about with either of them, are we? It *is* put-up-or-shut-up time."

"I'll put up."

"So will I. And Tracey will be all right for a bit. He isn't going to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kill his golden goose."

"She's going to be so much better off," Garth said.

"As Darren will. Once he gets over the shock."

"They'll each be grateful that fate took a hand."

"When they've had time to think it through. To *feel* how much better off they are."

"Tell you what," Garth said. "Whoever wins the game gets to choose who's first."

"You're on," Annette said.

"Life would be *so* much simpler if only they'd listen," Garth said.

"If only they'd listen."

Annette and Garth picked up their cards. ●

D'YA HEAR ME?

by Michael Z. Lewin

Garth stopped at the bar and offered cards and a cribbage board to Annette. But she said, "It's my turn."

"Is it?"

She tipped her head forward and raised one eyebrow—indicating what was understood between them: that her memory was better than his. Garth leaned back. "You scare me when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Look right through me." He left her at the bar and took the cards and board to a corner of the pub where they would be well away from other patrons. He sat and shuffled.

Annette arrived a couple of minutes later with two pint glasses which she put on the table. "Thank you," Garth said. Then he squinted at the beer.

"No Butcombe today," Annette said as she slid into her seat. "So I got Old Peculiar."

Because they hadn't played cards in the pub for several days, Garth fanned the cards on the table. Annette picked one, an ace. Garth shook his head and conceded the deal. Aces are low in cribbage and the first dealer in a new series of games is the person who picks the lower card.

Annette gathered the cards and shuffled them for herself. Garth said, "How's it going?"

"The cops still won't let poor Darren leave town."

"They don't *suspect* him, surely."

Annette sighed. "It must be just a precaution."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Precauting their backsides?"

"I don't know whether he would come here to stay with me, but he *must* want to get away somewhere, after what happened. Otherwise he's just stuck in the flat he shared with *her*. That can't be healthy." Annette offered the cards. "The cops are giving him a hard time because he has no alibi."

"Most people have no alibi most of the time. They spend time with spouses, with friends, and who believes *them* in court?" Garth cut. "But Darren's car must be clean—no dents, no blood. What's he supposed to have run her down with? His bicycle?"

"He says they think he might have stolen a car to do it with."

"Does your Darren know how to steal cars?"

Annette shrugged as she dealt. "I can, though."

"A woman of mystery."

"Well, I can get into a locked car. Some locked cars. Astras, for instance."

"Oh, that trick with looping doubled-up packing tape around the door lock?"

She nodded, picking up her hand.

"But can you get the car started and drive it away once you're in?"

"Sure," she said.

"Impressive."

"As long as the key's in the ignition."

Garth chuckled. "That's about what I'd be up to, too. And your Darren never hung out with lads who stole cars, did he?"

"A bit of shoplifting's all I ever knew about. A good lad, my Darren. I hate it so much when he's not happy."

"He's a real credit to you." With a sigh Garth dropped two cards into Annette's crib. "What's life worth if you never take chances?"

"Are you talking about the cards you're giving me?"

"What else?" He began the play-phase of the hand by putting down a four. "Let me get this straight. The police think Darren stole a car, ran down his girlfriend as she was crossing a street, and . . . and then what?"

Playing a seven, Annette said, "Ditched the car and came home to watch the television."

"Have they found a ditched, dented, bloody car?"

"Obviously not."

"So what do they think he did with it? Buried it in the woods? Or drove it off a cliff-top? And how's he supposed to have got home afterwards? Called for a taxi to come to the quarry he'd just pushed the car into?" Garth played another four and pegged two points for making the total of the cards they'd both played add up to fifteen.

"Apparently the police are trying to make something of the fact that he didn't report her missing." Annette played an eight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hmm."

"And when he told them it wasn't unusual for her to stay out all night without telling him where she was, they decided that gave him a motive."

"They didn't know the bitch, did they?" Garth said.

"It would be suspicious for any normal woman, but she was odious."

"The Beast."

"An *It* and not a *she,*" Annette said. She took a long drink of her beer. "And good riddance."

"I suppose the cops are paid to doubt people." Garth's six made the total twenty-nine.

"But all you have to do is look at Darren and you can see he'd never do anything like *that.*" An ace made the count up to thirty. "He's my own son, but he just doesn't have the brass balls to kill someone. However odious *It* is. However badly *It's* treated him."

"Go," Garth said, meaning he couldn't play another card without taking the total over thirty-one.

Annette, however, played another ace and pegged four, two for the pair and two for making thirty-one exactly.

"But it's going to work out for Darren, surely," Garth said.

Annette raised an eyebrow. "It's not like they're going to find the car, is it?"

"No."

"That's all right, then. And how's your Tracey taking the dramatic events in *her* life?"

"Not well, I must say. She can hardly believe that random violence of the kind she'd only ever seen on television actually took place in her own world."

"But the police up there don't think that she had anything to do with it, do they?"

"No, no. She's just the widow." Garth frowned. "Can you call yourself a widow even if you never married?"

"She had his children. She lived with him for years."

"She was the one he beat the hell out of," Garth said, looking gravely across the pub table.

"They probably have some special phrase for them these days. Like 'the significant survivor.' Or 'ex-punching bag.'"

"I don't like to think about that, please, Nettie. Even now it's over."

"Sorry."

"Anyway, the police aren't giving her a thought. Besides, she tells me the cops reckon that two people attacked him."

"They have witnesses?"

"Not that I've heard about. Tracey says that it's something about the pattern of the injuries."

"Oh."

"They think the weapons used were baseball bats."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Oh."

"But Tracey *is* feeling better, as of the last few days. Beginning to get over the shock, I think. She has a friend who lives next-door who seems to have been quite helpful."

"Isn't Tracey relieved not to be hit every other day?"

"She can't bring herself to say it," Garth said, "but each time I talk with her I hear more strength in her voice. She's getting some victim-support through the police, as well as help from the neighbours. It's like a veil of fear and oppression is gradually being lifted from her day-to-day routine. Each day she believes a little more that life is better."

Annette nodded. "Good. Yes, *good.* And is she all right for money?"

"I sent her some even though she said she doesn't need it. Plus—you'll like this—the evil bastard's parents are giving her money, too. For the children." Garth played a six and took a point for playing the last card. "Sorry, you've been waiting for me to play."

"Money from the parents . . . Reparations?" Annette said. "Yes, I do like that."

Before they began to score their hands, Garth said, "And how are *you* doing? In yourself."

"Fine."

"Really? No dreams? No shakes?"

"It was all a bit unsettling at first, but now I'm sleeping well. I must be like one of those fanatics who thinks she had God on her side."

"I'm getting images sometimes. They pop into my head."

"Of?"

"The way he looked when we left him."

"It was no worse than what they show on *Casualty* or *Holby City.*"

"I know." He sighed. "It's *ER* for me."

"How about you?" Annette asked. "Are the images affecting your sleep? Are you feeling anxious?"

"Surprisingly little."

"Not worried about getting caught?"

Garth shrugged and shook his head. "How much would I lose at my age? Would spending the rest of my time in jail be any worse than having done nothing when I knew full well what that bastard was doing to my Tracey over and over?"

"Even so. What we did . . ."

"And if I can stop that *and* not go to jail . . . Well, the truth of the matter," Garth said, "the real truth is that I feel elated more of the time than I feel worried. Sometimes I even think I'd welcome the chance to tell the world. It might just make another bastard living with someone else's daughter think twice."

"I know exactly what you mean," Annette said.

"You do?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I protected my child. And after a while, once he gets his life back, his head back, he'll be the child I used to know."

"So you're glad we did it."

"Thrilled."

Garth picked up his beer glass. "Here's to . . . problem-solving."

Annette clinked her glass against his and drank.

"Problem-solving tastes good," Garth said. "Even if it's not Butcombe."

"What have you done with your car?"

"I told them at the garage that I hit a badger."

"And?"

"They fixed it, charged me a fortune, and didn't think twice."

"I want to pay half the repair bill."

"You paid for the baseball bats." He took the six points in his hand to close the subject. "I was hoping for a five," he said of the turn-up card, a seven. "But *you* drew."

"They were softball bats, though I don't know what the difference is meant to be," Annette said. "Twelve, if very oddly." She pegged her score.

"We don't see that shape very often," he said of her eight, pair of sevens, and pair of aces. "Nice, though."

Annette turned over her crib. A jack and queen from Garth, a three and four from herself, and the seven turn-up. There were no scoring combinations. "I didn't want to rub your nose in it," she said.

"One, actually," he said, pointing. The jack was of the same suit as the turn-up card.

She pegged the point. "At least not too deep in it."

Garth gathered the cards and split them to shuffle. Then stopped.

"What?" she asked.

"Is that it?"

She cocked her head. "Meaning?"

"Any other problems you want to solve?"

"Oh." Then, "I see."

"Just a thought," Garth said. He riffled the two halves of the pack together and pushed them to make a whole.

"Got a taste for it now, have you?" Annette asked.

"I don't mean killing anyone else, necessarily, although I do like the fact that I got off my posterior to make the world a better place." He shuffled again.

"So do I."

He stopped. "And so, my dear, what else *would* make the world a better place, do you think?"

He offered her the pack of cards. She cut them and said, "Or who would the world be better off without?"

After a moment holding each other's gaze, they both picked up their glasses and drank, a silent—secret—toast. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

SWIFT AMONG THE PIRATES

by Edward D. Hoch

Christmas of 1799 was a bleak season for Alexander Swift. His good friend and mentor, George Washington, the new nation's first President, had died on the night of December 14, less than three years after handing over the reigns of government to John Adams and retiring to Mount Vernon. Swift and his wife Molly had attended the funeral and burial in the family vault four days later.

With the dawn of a new century, he tried to think of the future, of their son George and the young country into which he'd been born. But his thoughts always returned to Washington, and to the traitor Benedict Arnold. One evening Molly asked what was troubling him. "I suppose the fact that Arnold is still alive, living free in London. Washington should have had at least the satisfaction of knowing he'd died."

"It's over. There's nothing you can do about that now."

"I could go to England and kill him myself."

"But you wouldn't," she said. "You're a good man, Alex. You couldn't kill someone in cold blood, not even Benedict Arnold."

And of course she was right.

©2007 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Still, through the year that followed, as he went about his government duties, his mind kept returning to it. Not a cold-blooded killing, perhaps, but a duel. He knew they were still legal in England. Occasionally at night he'd waken from a dream, having imagined himself on a grassy meadow, dueling pistol in hand, facing off against Benedict Arnold at last.

John Adams served only one term as President, and the 1800 election brought Thomas Jefferson into the new presidential mansion following a bizarre tie vote between Jefferson and Aaron Burr in the Electoral College. The election was finally decided by the House of Representatives, with Burr becoming Vice President. It was some weeks after taking office in March 1801 that Jefferson summoned Swift to his office for an informal meeting.

"Washington always spoke highly of you," he said. "You never let him down when he called on you." Jefferson was a tall man with freckles and sandy hair beginning to turn gray. At times a bit more awkward than Washington in his speech, he still conveyed a commanding presence.

"I let him down once. I was never able to bring Benedict Arnold to justice."

"Perhaps someday that can be remedied," he told Swift. "Meantime, there is another matter. Since our nation won its freedom from Britain, we have been paying an annual tribute to the pasha of Tripoli to protect our commercial ships from attacks by pirates. The pasha has now informed me that the tribute must be raised to two hundred twenty-five thousand dollars a year, and I refuse to pay it. Next week, on May twentieth, I am dispatching a squadron of six frigates—all that we can spare—to cruise the Mediterranean and blockade the port of Tripoli, defending American vessels from attacks by Barbary pirates. I would like you to accompany them."

Alexander Swift smiled at the thought of it. "Twenty years ago I would have eagerly accepted such an assignment, sir. Now I fear my fighting days are past."

"For God's sake, no one is asking you to fight! You would act only as an observer, reporting back to me. Any fighting would be carried out by the crew and by detachments of Marines on board each ship."

"I don't know. It would mean leaving my wife and son for an extended period."

"I envisioned this as the thirteenth and last Alexander Swift tale," Ed Hoch told *EQMM*, "but I've never really ended a series yet, so it's possible that Swift might return sometime. As usual, the story is a mixture of fact and fiction. Jefferson did send frigates to the Barbary Coast in May of 1801, but of course the frigate *Saratoga* and its crew are fictitious."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Two months at most, perhaps less. If our ships have to remain longer, we'll find a way to bring you back."

Swift smiled at his words. "Maybe by hot air balloon?" But he knew he'd accept the assignment from President Jefferson, just as he had so many times from President Washington.

Molly wasn't pleased at the news of his forthcoming absence. "What about little George?" she tried to argue. "He looks forward to your bedtime stories."

"I'll be back before he knows I'm gone."

"But pirates, Alex!"

"Not as bad as facing an entire army of Redcoats. And it'll give me lots of good stories for George."

"You're hopeless!" she decided, and perhaps she was right.

A week later Swift was at sea, aboard the U.S. Navy's three-masted frigate *Saratoga,* bound for the Mediterranean. He found it somewhat ironic that the ship bore the name of General Benedict Arnold's greatest victory over the British, before he changed sides in the war. The Atlantic waters were relatively calm in May, and the six frigates rarely lost sight of each other through the voyage. They were under the command of Commodores Richard Dale and Edward Preble, but neither was aboard Swift's ship. His captain was Jonathan Flace, an ugly man whose scarred face reflected war at close quarters. His first mate, named Collins, wasn't much better, with a bald head and a twisted lip that gave him a perpetual sneer.

"I'm in this because I like it," Flace told Alexander on their first day out of port. "Our United States Navy is new and untried in many ways. Coming here against the Barbary pirates is our opportunity to prove how good we are. I respect President Jefferson and the mission he has sent us on. Under Dale and Preble we will crush these pirates and send them running."

"I'm sure the President will be pleased to hear that, sir."

"Good. Are your quarters satisfactory?"

"Perfectly so." He was sharing crowded quarters with a Marine Corps second lieutenant named Sam Vantage, but he knew better than to complain. A man like Captain Flace might easily have tossed him overboard.

In truth, Vantage was a pleasant enough berth-mate. A handsome and knowledgeable young man still in his twenties, he'd won his commission only months before. On their second day at sea he'd taken Swift on a tour of the ship, showing him the impressive sails in their full rigging. "You'll note that all our main cannons are on the upper deck. Older frigates had guns on two decks, but the lower deck now carries no armament and functions as berth space for the crew. Our berths are actually below the waterline."

"I would have thought that two decks of cannons would offer greater firepower."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"True, but in rough seas, the two-deckers had to close their gunports on the lower deck to avoid being swamped. This way our guns are always ready for use, even in rough weather. Our long hulls and low upper works make for a sleeker, faster vessel."

"What size are these cannons?" Swift asked, patting a rough metal barrel. "They seem quite large."

"They're twenty-four-pounders, as large as those the Royal Navy carries. This ship is one of our newest and largest, carrying thirty-eight guns, nineteen on each side. The main batteries are twenty-four-pounders, the rest are eighteen-pounders. We can blast any pirate ship out of the water." He spoke with the confidence of youth.

"Do you think we'll encounter any of them?"

"We'll be ready if we do."

Swift bent down to lift one of the cannonballs from its stacked pyramid. "These could make a few nice holes in any pirate ship."

"They are solid, but they're working on some that break apart after they're fired and do even more damage."

He took Swift on a tour of the galley and even climbed with him up the rope ladder to the crow's nest. Molly would have been horrified, Swift thought as he clung to the swaying ladder. They went on to meet the helmsman who steered the vessel. "The captain rarely does it himself," Vantage explained.

They were met by a naval lieutenant, Quincy Pitt, to whom Swift had been introduced the previous day. "Enjoying the view, Mr. Swift?"

"Very much so. Lieutenant Vantage has just been giving me the ship's tour. You have a fine vessel here."

"We'll know soon enough," Pitt said. He was the gunnery officer, in charge of those thirty-eight cannons.

By early June they had passed the Rock of Gibraltar and sailed into the Mediterranean. Within days the squadron reached Malta and turned due south toward Tripoli. The ships took up their stations as the harbor came into view. At first there seemed little reaction on shore, but at dawn the following day Swift was awakened by the sound of cannons. The city's shore batteries had opened fire. Spouts of water showed that the balls were landing short of their targets, but there was still reason for concern.

"Action stations!" Captain Flace commanded, rousing the men with a trumpet call to arms. Within moments the crew had manned their guns, ready to return fire. Swift stayed under cover as the water spouts seemed to move a bit closer. He was beginning to regret taking on this assignment for Jefferson.

But the shore batteries were no match for the navy's twenty-four-pounders. As Quincy Pitt and Captain Flace rushed back and forth, urging the gunners on, cannonballs and gunpowder were being reloaded for the next round. There was a moment's silence

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and then when the silence stretched out, the captain ordered, "Hold your fire!"

Sam Vantage explained to Swift, "The enemy's taken a break to elevate their cannons, so the balls will travel further. They'll probably use more gunpowder to increase the velocity, too. It's not over yet."

However, the day passed uneventfully. Peering through his telescope, Flace reported that all seemed quiet on the shore batteries. "I believe we have delivered President Jefferson's reply to their demand for tribute," he concluded.

Night settled slowly over the anchored squadron of frigates. A cool breeze had blown in, creating a light mist that turned the moon into a fuzzy ball far above their heads. Swift retired to his bunk with a certain uneasiness, but the gently lapping water lulled him to sleep almost at once.

He was awakened suddenly by the sound of cannon fire from the shore batteries. Sam Vantage was already out of his bunk and nearly dressed. "What time is it?" Swift muttered.

"Daybreak. But there is a heavy mist over the water."

Swift followed him topside where the gun crews were already at their stations, loading gunpowder and cannonballs while Pitt shouted sharp commands. It was Captain Flace who issued the order, "Fire at will!"

All up and down the line fuses were lit and within seconds the cannons began to thunder their message, each one recoiling on its wheels as it let loose its fiery blast. The return fire from shore was still falling far short of its mark, and Swift wondered what they expected to accomplish.

Then suddenly he knew. A cannonball flew overhead, crashing into one of their masts. Another followed, not from the direction of shore but from the open sea. The deck was alive with shouts and confusion until Swift and the others turned away from shore and saw a small frigate materialize from the mist not a hundred yards away. It was flying a red banner with a crescent moon, one of the flags of the Barbary pirates.

"To starboard!" Pitt shouted. "They're trying to ram us!"

Loading and firing the starboard cannons took valuable minutes. The pirate vessel headed directly toward them but then turned at the last moment, as if preparing to fire another volley. Swift seemed to realize the true danger before the others. "They're going to board us!" he told Vantage, catching a glimpse of their foes holding scimitars for close combat.

The two ships came together before the *Saratoga* could return fire. Instantly the pirates were upon them, swinging over on ropes to hit the deck with weapons ready. Swift was relieved to see that the detachment of marines was prepared for them. Within min-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

utes the frigate's deck was awash with blood. Judging by their weapons and garb, Swift guessed the attackers to be Turks, as many of the Barbary pirates were. One of them fell before him, hit by a bullet from a Marine musket, and Swift grabbed up his scimitar to defend himself.

He brought down one of the attackers and saw that some marines were swinging over to the pirate ship, taking the fight to the enemy. Cannons were useless at such close range, and might do as much damage to the *Saratoga* as to the enemy. Another round of fire from Marine muskets drove back some of the pirates, but the fighting was soon at such close quarters that no clear shots were possible. It was cutlass against scimitar and dagger.

The battle lasted more than thirty minutes, and in the end the entire pirate crew had been killed or captured. The Americans suffered six dead and eleven seriously wounded. A search of the pirate frigate revealed a young female captive half crazy with fear. Quincy Pitt brought her onto the *Saratoga,* his comforting arms holding tight around her as he guided her along the plank bridge between the vessels. Swift stood to one side watching the crew clean up after the dead and wounded. The slain pirates were unceremoniously dumped overboard, while the wounded were given minimal medical attention by the ship's surgeon on board.

"What happens to them now?" Swift asked Captain Flace.

"We've signaled our flagship to come alongside and remove the wounded. I'll keep a few prisoners here in the event we need them for bargaining. Their captain is dead, but the first mate was uninjured and I will question him personally. Their ship is badly damaged and we'll scuttle her."

"What about our own damage?"

"The mast needs repairing, but I think we can handle it. I don't want to limp back to port with it like this."

"Is there any possibility of another pirate attack?"

Flace scowled at the thought. "The weather was right for it this morning, with that mist to obscure their approach while we were busy with the shore batteries. That won't happen again. And they've lost a ship and crew. They might think twice before risking another one."

Swift was more interested in the woman who'd been rescued. She was an Egyptian named Abden Said, dressed in torn pants and a bloodstained silk blouse. She was still in her twenties, but with sad brown eyes that seemed to reflect a lifetime of pain. Her English was good enough to be understood and Swift sat in while she was questioned by Captain Flace and Pitt. She told them she'd been sailing on a small boat near Alexandria when they were seized by pirates a month earlier. The man with her had been killed and she'd been taken captive. "They say I will be sold into

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slavery," she told Captain Flace. "I cry and beg but it does no good."

"Were you mistreated?" he asked delicately.

"I am mistreated all my life."

"Who is this man we captured?" he asked, indicating a prisoner seated in irons across the cabin.

The man, with a scarred face and a black bandanna around his head, spit on the deck. He answered in a language none of them understood.

"What is your name?" Quincy Pitt asked.

It was the woman who answered. "His name is Dread, but I do not speak his language. He may be from the Greek islands. He is a gunner's mate."

Captain Flace waved the prisoner away. "Lock him up in the brig with the other prisoners," he told Pitt. "And bring me the key to their leg irons. They are not to be freed except by me."

"What about the woman?" Swift asked Flace after the prisoner had been removed.

He turned to her. "We have no separate quarters for you. I will arrange for you to sleep in the galley and you can help with the meals. If we learn of a ship bound for Alexandria we can transfer you to it."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I will work for you."

Later, toward evening, when the flagship had come alongside to transfer the wounded and prisoners, they gave a respectful burial at sea to the six dead Americans. Swift had never been present at this ceremony before, and he said a silent prayer as each of the bodies slid off into its watery grave.

It was young Sam Vantage who came to him on deck later that night as he stood gazing at the stars. "A beautiful sight, isn't it, Mr. Swift?"

"It is indeed," he agreed. "It's difficult remembering that men died here today under that sky."

"Did you fight in the War of Independence, sir?"

"I was not in the army, but I undertook a number of missions for General Washington, and later for President Washington, including some involving Benedict Arnold."

"I read about him. Did they ever catch him?"

"Not yet," Swift replied.

He didn't think anyone slept well that night. The excitement of the battle, and the fear that it might happen again, had everyone on edge. Shortly before midnight he walked around the upper deck and saw Captain Flace bending over a cannon to examine it. Flace heard his footsteps and whirled around, hand on his sword. "Good evening, Mr. Swift. You startled me."

"Sorry. I couldn't sleep."

"Can't be too careful when there are prisoners aboard," the cap-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tain remarked with his familiar scowl. "I have to check everything myself. It's my ship. I am responsible."

"Your men did well today. I will report as much to President Jefferson."

"Thank you, Mr. Swift. I only hope I am able to return to Washington and report to him personally."

They parted then, and Swift returned to the cabin he shared with Sam Vantage. The young officer was not in his bunk, but Swift heard him come in sometime later, undressing in the dark and sliding beneath his blanket.

It was Quincy Pitt who awakened them before dawn with the shocking news that Captain Flace had been found dead on the upper deck, his skull crushed by one of the ship's cannonballs.

The first mate, Collins, took charge of the *Saratoga,* ordering the signalman to notify the flagship of the event. Gathering the crew on deck, he spoke briskly. "Aye, there's a killer among us. The captain's death was no accident. I want you first to check and make certain none of our prisoners could have escaped. After that I'll be talking to every member of this crew until I find the guilty person."

When the crew members returned to their stations, Alexander Swift stepped forward and introduced himself to Collins. "Perhaps the captain told you about me. I am aboard this ship at the direct request of President Jefferson, reporting on the success of our mission against the Barbary pirates. I would like to assist in your investigation."

He smirked at Swift through his twisted lip. "You can do the whole thing, for all I care. I came here to kill pirates, not find a murderer."

"Might any of the crew have reason to kill Flace?"

"He was a stern master. No man can be a good captain without bruising some feelings—and some bodies."

"Whose, for instance?"

He shook his head. "That's not for me to say. I don't implicate innocent men."

"Was there anything in Flace's pockets that might be a clue?"

"Come and see for yourself."

Swift followed him to the frigate's makeshift hospital, where the surgeon was tending the wounded from the previous day's battle. In one corner he saw Flace's body, wrapped in a sack that hadn't yet been sewn shut. The back of his head showed evidence of the terrible blow that had taken his life. A cloth bag next to his body held the contents of his pockets. "Is this everything?" Swift asked, glancing through the few coins, a handkerchief, a pocketknife, and a small compass.

"That's all."

"Didn't he have a ship's manifest?"

"That would be on the bridge along with his log book."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Could I see it?"

Collins hesitated, then said, "Follow me."

The men on the bridge were silent when they arrived, barely nodding to Collins. The ship was still at anchor and there was little activity. They seemed to be awaiting the burial of their captain, which would come later in the day. The ship's log and manifest yielded no new information, only the note on dead and injured, and the transfer to the flagship. Eight prisoners remained on board, along with the rescued woman. "Is Abden Said still in the galley?" he asked Collins.

"The woman? We've put her to work there."

Swift found her working with the cook on the crew's evening meal. Like the Royal Navy, the Americans had mastered the art of brewing beer and baking bread on shipboard, and the days of insect-infested biscuits were behind them. Abden worked in one of the marine uniforms, a small size but it was still too big for her. "What happened to your captain?" she asked at once, removing a loaf of bread from the oven.

"Someone killed him, crushed his skull with a cannonball."

"One of the pirates?"

"That seems likely, but they were supposed to be locked up. How are you doing here?"

"Very well. It is good to be free again—with the Americans instead of the pirates."

He wasn't sure how safe she'd be as the only woman on a ship full of sailors and marines; he could only do his best to protect her until she could be transferred to another vessel. He left her and headed below deck to the brig. There were two guards now instead of the usual one, and the sullen prisoners were crowded into a single cell. One who spoke English called out to Swift. "Get us out of here!" he demanded. "Some are seriously wounded!"

"Our captain is dead," Swift told him. "You will probably be transferred to another ship soon." He turned to one of the guards and asked, "Were any of these men allowed out of the brig during the night?"

A marine guard answered his question. "We took them to the head one at a time around midnight."

"Were they out of your sight?"

"Just for a minute or so, and they still had their leg irons. They weren't going anywhere."

Swift stared at the man named Dread, wondering if he could have pulled it off somehow. But before he could ask another question there was a sound like distant thunder that sent the frigate rocking. The shore batteries had commenced firing again.

Swift ran up on deck and found Quincy Pitt shouting orders to his men. Well-trained teams took up their positions at each of the port

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cannons, while the officers stayed alert for another attack from the starboard side. But this day was clear and only their flagship was on the horizon. The shore batteries were still firing and Swift counted a half-dozen water spouts from cannonballs landing precariously close to them. Then, as he watched, the ship's cannonballs and powder were loaded, the fuses lit. At Pitt's command, the *Saratoga's* guns replied to the shore batteries. Swift saw one battlement torn apart by a direct hit from a cannonball.

Suddenly their ship shuddered as one of the enemy cannonballs scored a direct hit. Swift was thrown to the deck, and for a moment he feared the hit had been a fatal one below the waterline. Then Sam Vantage appeared in the hatch and shouted, "It hit near the brig. We've got injured men!"

Swift followed him down the steps while Pitt directed the others to remain at their stations and reload. Another cannonball from the shore batteries hit the water within fifty feet of the ship as the acting captain gave the command to weigh anchor and pull back to a safe distance.

Below deck, all was a frenzy. The cannonball had sliced through the wooden hull, injuring several of the pirate captives and their two marine guards. Vantage was lifting a shattered piece of timber off one of the marines while others unlocked the door of the brig and tended to the injured prisoners. Swift saw Abden Said hurry down from the galley, helping to treat the injured. As Swift made his way to her she was trying to comfort the one called Dread. "He has bad chest pains," she told Swift. "He thinks something is broken."

"I'll get the surgeon."

Swift was aware that the ship was in motion, pulling back out of harm's way. He stayed below for a while longer, until he was sure the ship was in no immediate danger, and then hurried up to the bridge. Collins and the helmsman were at the wheel, struggling to head the ship further out to sea. "I've signaled Commodore Dale that we've been hit," he said. "He's coming aboard personally to inspect the damage."

"At least they've stopped firing."

Collins nodded. "We're out of range now. These ships are no good against cannonballs. We have one named the *Constitution,* a much larger frigate with wooden sides seven inches thick and strong as iron. Cannonballs actually bounce off it. That's in the West Indies now, but if this mission goes on it will probably be sent here as our flagship. It can carry fifty-four guns and has a crew of four hundred and fifty, including fifty-five marines."

It was some hours before the flagship anchored near them and the longboat was dispatched carrying Commodore Dale and several others. Collins welcomed them with dignity, explaining that he was the first mate and acting captain. "You say that Captain

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Flace was killed by a cannonball?" Dale asked. "Was it fired from the shore or the pirate ship?"

"Neither, sir. Someone on our ship dropped it on his head."

"My God! You have pirate prisoners, don't you?"

"We do, but they were confined to the brig in leg irons at the time."

"You suspect someone in the crew? I can't believe that."

"It's hard to believe," Collins told him, "but the captain may have made some enemies. He could be a brutal man at times."

"I'll want to see the log, especially regarding punishments." He glanced at Swift, as if noticing him for the first time. "Who might you be, sir?"

"Alexander Swift, special emissary from President Jefferson. I am to report on this first mission against the Barbary pirates."

"Yes, I was advised that you would be aboard the *Saratoga*. Now let us inspect the damage to the ship."

Below deck, crewmen had already covered the gash with canvas and wood. Commodore Dale inspected the repair work carefully, running his hand along the canvas. Finally he gave his verdict. "This is a good temporary patch, but it would never stand up in battle or in heavy seas. Given that, and the earlier damage to your mast, plus the loss of your captain, I must order the *Saratoga* back to port."

"Yes, sir," Collins said. "I understand."

"You will sail tomorrow for the island of Malta, where more temporary repairs can be made. Then you will return home with a skeleton crew. The rest of your men and the marine detachment will be shifted to other ships in our squadron."

Collins was in no position to disagree. "Very well, sir. I'll give you a copy of the roster. What about the prisoners?"

"We'll hold them aboard one of the ships. They may come in valuable as trade."

"We have an Egyptian woman they captured near Alexandria."

"She can come along too. We'll see that she gets home safely."

Collins turned to Swift. "What about him? Do we take him back with us?"

Dale considered it for a moment. "You can stay aboard with the skeleton crew, Mr. Swift, and sail with them to Malta for repairs, or I can put you on the British frigate *Bombay* bound for London. From there you should find an American ship to transport you home."

London. Alexander Swift remembered his unfinished business with Benedict Arnold. "London, sir," he decided without hesitation.

"Fine. We expect to encounter the *Bombay* within a day or two. Its captain has instructions to sail close to our position as protection against the pirates."

"Then everything is settled," Collins said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Everything but the killing of Captain Flace. I'll want to examine that punishment log. The killer's motive may reside there."

Swift cleared his throat. "That may not be necessary, sir. I grant that in a crime such as this, motive becomes most important. But the killer may have had a different motive entirely. I was aware that Captain Flace had especially good hearing. He was immediately aware of anyone approaching him from behind. Even if Dread or one of the other captive pirates had managed to escape briefly, they could not have sneaked up on him without his knowing it. Captain Flace appears to have been crouched down, inspecting one of the guns, when the killer dropped the cannonball on his head. It had to be someone he trusted, someone he didn't fear."

"One of the crew."

"But there's something else to consider—the motive. Would he have felt safe with a crew member he might have beaten or abused? I thought about another possible motive, and I remembered the contents of Flace's pockets."

"Nothing unusual there," Collins said.

"No, but there was something unusual missing. I was present when Captain Flace ordered the prisoners placed in leg irons and the key brought to him. The key was not among his possessions when his body was found."

"Who would steal it?" Collins asked. "Certainly none of the crew would try to free the pirates."

"No, but suppose one of them was still free."

Commodore Dale frowned and turned to Collins. "Is it possible that one of the pirates is hiding on your ship?"

The acting captain bristled at the notion. "Mr. Swift just told us no one could have sneaked up on Flace without his knowing it. There's no other pirate here."

"You forget one person," Swift told him. "Abden Said, the supposed prisoner we rescued from the pirates. There are historical records of women pirates, you know. She was present when Flace told Lieutenant Pitt to bring him the key to the prisoners' leg irons. After dark she followed Flace on deck and spoke with him. When he stooped down to inspect one of the cannons she lifted the cannonball over her head and brought it down on him, killing him instantly. Then she went through his pockets and took the key to the leg irons. I suspect she planned to free the eight prisoners in an attempt to take over the ship, but there were two guards on duty by that time and she couldn't do it."

"A clever explanation," the commodore agreed, "but you need something to back it up."

"How is this? Immediately after her supposed rescue, she told us she could not speak to the pirate Dread because she didn't understand his language. But after the shore battery hit the ship and injured him, she conversed quite well with him."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Still—"

"Search her," Swift told them. "She wouldn't risk trying to hide the key somewhere on the ship. She'll still have it on her."

Abden Said fought like a fury, but they found the key under her pants, tied to her thigh with a length of string.

Alexander Swift never learned of the young woman's fate. She was to be tried by a U.S. Navy court on the day he was transferred to the H.M.S. *Bombay.* He arrived in London during the last week in June, learning there would be a ship to America leaving in five days' time. It took him only two days to discover the address where Benedict Arnold and his wife resided.

It was Peggy Arnold who opened the door to his knock. "You are Alexander Swift," she said softly, recognizing him at once.

"You remember me."

"You attended our wedding as Washington's representative."

He stared at the woman in front of him, barely able to connect her with the lovely girl who was the belle of Philadelphia. "You have a good memory."

"I remember the happy days, not what came after. What has brought you here, Mr. Swift?"

He glanced around at the shabby furniture, the tarnished dream of a life that might have been something different. "I have some unfinished business with your husband, Peggy."

"Then I fear you have arrived too late. Benedict passed away two weeks ago. He is buried at St. Mary's Church in Battersea."

Swift was stunned at the news—at the thought that he'd arrived too late for the vengeance he'd sought for so long. "What happened?" he asked—a question that took in the whole of their lives. "I thought the British had rewarded him."

"They did at first, but he loaned money to friends who did not repay him. His business ventures failed, and the government lost interest in us. My children and I are barely surviving."

They talked for a bit longer, and he declined an offer of tea, saying he must be on his way. At the door he paused and asked, "What was the date of his death?"

"June fourteenth."

He nodded, seeing some sort of symbolism in it. "The Continental Congress passed the first Flag Act on that date in seventeen seventy-seven, making the Stars and Stripes the official flag of our new nation."

"He should never have turned against it—his flag or his country," she said with a touch of sadness in her voice. "We were both so wrong."

"I wish you well, Peggy," he told her, and went down the steps to the street. It was time to go home. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MOTHER'S MILK

by Chris Simms

Just a glimpse across the graveyard at a hundred yards and he knew that milking her dry would pose no problem at all.

To an ordinary person she was a sad-looking woman in her forties, fat thighs bulging as she bent forward to replace the dying flowers before the gravestone with a fresh bouquet.

But to Daniel Norris she stank of need. The need for company. The need for human warmth. The need for someone to lavish kindness upon. So acute was his ability to sniff out and exploit vulnerability, she may as well have held a loudhailer to her lips and announced to the cemetery, "In sickness and in health, please, God, give me someone to care for."

He slid into the shadow of a moss-furred crypt and waited for her to pass. As he stood there out of the weak October sun, a breeze whispered between the graves and a shiver ran through him. The ugly clacking of two crows squabbling in a nearby yew tree masked the sound of her approaching steps, but he soon heard the crunch of gravel as her stout legs took her back towards the gates, hair dull and brown, head held up in an attempt to bravely face the grey afternoon.

As soon as she was out of sight he hurried over to the grave she had just left. The headstone was new. He sneered at her tacky taste. Shiny black marble topped by two maudlin cherubs trumpeting a silent lament to an unhearing God. His eyes scanned quickly over the inscription, letters chiselled out then painted with a layer of fake gold. Something about her babies now being with the angels. His eyebrows raised in slight surprise: He had assumed it was a husband and not young ones she'd lost. Not that it mattered to him. He knew she was alone in the world.

He studied the large and expensive bouquet. If this was the

Chris Simms is that rare author who can create a gripping psychological thriller even at short-story length. This is his second story for *EQMM;* last year his novels too started appearing in the U.S. in a series of mass market reprints by Bywater Books. See *Pecking Order* and *Outside the White Lines.* In the U.K. a new Simms thriller entitled *Savage Moon* is slated for 2007 release.

©2007 by Chris Simms

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

weekly ritual he suspected, she had plenty of cash to spare. He rubbed his hands together in the chill autumnal air. Wealthy widows were particularly easy to fleece.

Several days dragged by as he eked out an existence between dimly lit boozers and dingy bookies, their floors littered with torn paper slips. A win on the dogs on Friday provided some much-needed cash for the weekend. He combed his grey-flecked hair and put his blazer on over his only decent shirt. Then he treated himself to twenty Bensons, leaving the dented tin of rolling tobacco in his hostel room before heading to the Tap and Spile.

During a visit earlier in the week he'd read the small sign above the door and noted the licensee was a single woman. Jan Griffiths. He'd watched her from a shadowy corner, noticing the lack of wedding ring as she pulled the pints while keeping up an easy flow of conversation with her regulars. He'd liked her dyed blond hair, throaty laugh, and sparkling blue eyes.

Now he walked into the pub with an easy roll in his step, one hand in his pocket. Confident and at ease with his place in the world. He slid his thin frame onto a barstool, nodded at her with a wolfish half-smile, then watched as she registered the expression. He knew it never failed to pique the interest of her type.

"You look like the cat who's got the cream," she stated, a wary curiosity in her voice.

"Do I?" he said, taking the twenties from his pocket. "Just got some good news on a business deal I'm in town for. A bottle of your best champagne, please." Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

She smiled, pleased to be filling the till so early in the evening. "I'll need to get it from upstairs. How many glasses would you like?" she replied, eyes moving to the empty seats behind him.

"Well, I'm hoping you won't make me drink it alone. So, two, please."

She smiled again, turning on her heel and looking back at him over her shoulder. "Never can say no to a bit of bubbly," she said archly, hips swinging slightly as she headed for the stairs.

Peeling the cellophane from his cigarettes, he looked around the cosy pub at the scattering of drinkers quietly sipping their pints. A warm glow spread across his chest. "Nice place," he said to himself, thinking he could get used to it.

She reappeared a minute later, bottle of Moet standing upright in the ice bucket in her hands. "One bottle of bubbly."

He watched as she took the foil off and then expertly prised the cork loose with a soft pop. A small gush of foam emerged and his eyes wandered to her generous cleavage.

"So what's the business deal?"

He glanced up, realising she'd seen where his eyes had strayed. She didn't seem bothered. "Oh, a new retail development in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

town centre," he replied. During his first recce round town he'd spotted a large commercial property for sale. "The one next to that big Barclays."

"On Prince's Street?" She sounded impressed. "That's massive. Have you bought it?"

"I wish," he said with a smile. "I'm just the middleman between the vendor and the buyers. Venture capitalists from the Middle East. Still, I get my commission as a result."

She placed two glasses on the bar and he nodded at them. "Will you be mum?"

She poured them both a drink and handed a glass to him. "Well, here's to your deal."

"Thanks."

They clinked glasses and he took a large sip, briefly savouring the sensation of bubbles popping against the roof of his mouth before swallowing it down. "Delicious," he sighed, offering her a cigarette out of the new pack.

"So where are you from?" she asked, taking one and leaning against the bar.

He reached for the cheap disposable lighter in his pocket, but changed his mind. "Have you any matches?"

She flicked him a book and he lit their cigarettes. "Wherever business takes me," he replied. "I'll be in town for a while yet, tying up loose ends of this deal, sorting out planning permission for the shops."

"It's going to be a shopping centre, then?"

"That's the intention. My clients want retail units put in, then they'll offer out the space to the usual suspects. Boots, Topshop, WH Smith, and the like."

He took another sip, aware of her eyes assessing him, and he realised she'd have heard countless tales of bullshit across the bar.

"So how long have you been in the pub game?" he asked casually.

"Donkey's years." She laughed. "It's all I know."

"You run a nice place here," he said, glancing round.

She gave a small smile. "It's not bad. Business-wise, I mean. The big pubs they've opened in the centre have taken away a few customers, but mainly the younger ones. I prefer a quieter crowd."

He refilled their glasses. "Absolutely. Not enough places like this left."

She moved away to serve another customer and he almost drained his glass, wondering how quickly she'd come back to him. To his satisfaction, it was almost straightaway.

The allure of strangers. Deciding not to push things too early, he finished his drink and patted the tops of his thighs. "Well, I'd better be off. My clients are taking me to dinner at seven o'clock."

Her eyes went to the unfinished bottle. "What about your champagne?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"If it would keep, I'd say put it behind the bar for tomorrow," he replied, hinting at his return. "You have it. My treat."

"Well . . . thanks," she answered uncertainly, wrong-footed by his sudden departure.

"See you again," he smiled, heading for the door.

He returned to the cemetery exactly a week after he first saw her. Earlier in the morning he'd picked up a drab suit in a charity shop, pairing it with his oldest shirt and tie. Finally he'd put on a pair of battered leather shoes, pleased with the look of someone down on his luck but determined to keep up appearances nonetheless.

She appeared at eleven o'clock, making her way straight to the grave, another large bouquet in her arms. He made a rip in the paper that wrapped his bunch of cheap chrysanthemums, watching as she plucked a couple of weeds from the bed of marble chippings in front of the headstone before exchanging fresh flowers for the wilted. After standing in sad contemplation for a good five minutes, she started to turn around.

He stood up, walking over a couple of graves to make the path that would intersect their routes. Two lost souls, drifting alone in the world. As he walked with head bowed, he tried to drag up any memories that might bring tears to his eyes. God knew he'd been witness to enough pain. But the anguished weeping of so many women had all been his doing, and the images of their distraught faces did nothing to stir his heart.

Now she was less than twenty feet from his side. He caught his foot in a nonexistent crack and stumbled forward, flowers cascading to the ground as the wrapping tore completely. Regaining his balance, he stooped forward as if to start picking them up. But then he placed his hands on his knees and let out an anguished sob. He heard her footsteps stop beside him and, knowing that it would clinch his act, the tears he'd been failing to summon suddenly appeared.

A hand was placed on his shoulder and he looked up at her face as it wavered and shifted through the liquid filling his eyes.

"There, there," she murmured, pressing his head to her bosom.

Within four days he had packed his few possessions, moved out of the hostel, and was sleeping in her spare room. She'd lapped up his story of a childhood spent in care homes, adult years wasted in a directionless drift, not anchored by family to any area. Then his long search for his real mother—a search that had finally ended in the town's cemetery, at a grave that had only been dug the year before.

She brought her blubbering under control by clucking and fussing around him. Bustling around in the kitchen, carrying through dinner on a tray as he sat dejected on her sofa, his eyes furtively searching the room while she'd cooked his food.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Every night she'd conclude her nursing routine by bringing him a mug of Ovaltine. Creamy, smooth, and comforting, it was a taste he quickly came to look forward to. "That's because I make it with milk, the proper way," she'd say and smile, her look of pleasure increasing with his every sip.

But the need to get to a pub and enjoy a cigarette in a comfortable seat rather than standing out on her bloody patio was steadily growing. So he began to recover from his feigned despondency, apparently revived by the succession of meals she so lovingly prepared. One day he announced that it was time he sorted himself out. Found a job and place of his own.

Her eyes had widened in alarm at his mention of moving out. "Stay as long as you like. The house is too big for just me. I like you being here. Please." The desperation in her voice surprised him. It was going to be so easy cleaning her out of everything.

He pondered her words, thinking of the three bedrooms upstairs. The spare room he slept in, her pink nightmare, and the locked door with the nursery placard on it. He'd peeped through the keyhole at the first opportunity and was just able to make out babyish wallpaper and some cuddly toys on a chest of drawers. Three bedrooms and a decent garden. Worth what? Two hundred grand at least.

"What happened to your family, Marjorie? What happened to your babies?" he whispered, curious that, apart from her creepy shrine, all traces of them had been removed from the house.

The question obviously distressed her and she waved it away with an agitated flutter of her hands. "I really can't speak about it. Not yet. I'm sorry, it's still all too . . . raw," she said, fingers grasping at the crucifix around her neck.

He nodded. "I understand, Marjorie, I understand. But I must repay your kindness somehow. Let me pay you some rent at least."

She shook her head. "Really, I don't need it."

He paused, always amazed at his ability to bring out the maternal instincts of women. "Think of it for me. For my self-respect if nothing else. There's a job I spotted when I first arrived here. A salesman for those industrial vacuums they use in pubs and restaurants. It's something I've done before. They'd take me on, I just need to brush up a bit . . ." His words died away and his eyes dropped to his scuffed old shoes.

She sprang to her feet. "You need proper work clothes." She crossed to the dresser in the corner, took out a file from the top drawer, and extracted several twenty-pound notes from inside. "Here, take this. Buy yourself a nice new suit."

"No, Marjorie, I couldn't," he protested, holding up his hands while making a mental note of the file's whereabouts.

"Then take it as a loan," she insisted.

"Okay," he agreed reluctantly. "And I'm paying you back every penny, understand?" he added, knowing she'd never ask for it back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

He scoured the shops for a sale. After finding one and then mercilessly bargaining down the young assistant, he picked up a suit, three shirts, and a pair of shoes for a steal. The deal left him with over eighty pounds in change. He headed straight for the nearest pub with a copy of the *Racing Post,* where he picked his runners over a couple of pints and several cigarettes.

When he set off back to Marjorie's at five o'clock that afternoon he was fifty quid and several more pints up. As he ambled happily along he wondered how to explain the state he was in. She opened the door to find him swaying on her doorstep, shopping bag hanging from one arm.

"I rang them. I've got an interview tomorrow," he sighed.

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" she said, confused by the look of sadness on his face.

"But then I went back to my mother's grave. Oh, Marjorie, if I hadn't dithered for so long before tracing her, I might have spoken to her before she died. I'm afraid I've had a few drinks."

"Come here," she said, arms outstretched.

He slipped inside and endured a crushing hug.

"You mustn't punish yourself. Now take that jacket off and sit down." She led him to the sofa in the immaculate front room. "I'm making tea. Is beef casserole all right?"

"Great, thanks," he replied with a weak smile.

She sniffed at his jacket. "This reeks of cigarettes. You really shouldn't smoke."

"I know. It's only when I'm stressed."

She nodded. "Well, I'll give it a good airing on the washing line."

"Thank you," he said, reaching for the TV's remote control as soon as she was out of the room.

He woke with a sore throat and cursed himself for smoking so heavily the day before. She'd washed and ironed his shirts the previous evening and he walked down the stairs straightening his tie.

"Oh, Daniel. You look the perfect gentleman." She moved across the kitchen, encroaching on his personal space. "Stand still, you've got a stray strand of hair."

He fought the urge to slap her hand away, instead gratefully smiling as she smoothed it into place.

"Perfect," she said, standing back. "I've ordered you a cab. We don't want you going by bus and getting there late."

He sat down and waited for her to cook him breakfast.

"Just here's fine, mate." He leaned over from the rear of the cab.

"The betting office?" the driver replied, confused after hearing the pudgy woman wish the passenger good luck in his job interview.

"Yeah, here will do."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"That's four eighty then, please."

He counted out the exact money, then climbed out, the cabbie not bothering to thank him as he drove off. A bout of coughing caught him by surprise as he walked towards the bookie's and he lit a cigarette to quell the itch in his throat.

The morning was spent working out his bets. He rang Marjorie at midday. "I've got the job. Can you believe it?!"

"Daniel, that's brilliant. I'll cook something special for tea."

"They want me to start straightaway. I've got a sales patch right in the centre of town. Mainly pubs, so I'll probably end up smelling of cigarettes each day."

"Never-mind. Did they say what they'll pay you?"

"It's commission only, but the vacuum is a great product. I'm sure I'll sell loads. I've got to demo it to prospective customers. They're dropping me off and have given me a special trolley to wheel it around on."

"They're making you carry one around town?"

"Yes. And I have to drop it back off at the factory at the end of each day."

"That's ridiculous. You need a car."

He smiled to himself. "I'll manage somehow. Now I've got to go. See you later."

He hung up and then walked over to the Tap and Spile. "Hello there," he said, taking the same stool at the bar, straightening a pristine shirt cuff.

She looked up, a tea towel in her hand, eyes passing briefly over his suit. "Hello again. Thanks for the champagne the other night."

"My pleasure," he replied.

"How's business going?"

"Okay," he said. "There's a few question marks over the rates the council wants to charge. I'm arguing it's a multi-let property, so not subject to the standard commercial tariffs they'd levy if . . ." He paused. "Sorry, that's probably more of an answer than you were expecting. How about you?"

She looked round the deserted pub. "Lunches tend to be quiet. But I'm not giving up the bar meals. Every decent pub should offer them."

He picked up a menu. "What do you recommend, then?"

"I don't know," she said, polishing another glass. "The chicken pie is good."

"Homemade, too, I see."

"Of course."

"Is it breast or leg?" he asked provocatively.

"You'll have to see," she replied, one eyebrow arching upwards.

"Fine with me. I love both," he said, placing an elbow on the bar.

He walked back to the bookie's a couple of hours later, stopping at a newsagent's to buy some Rennie for the burning ache at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

back of his throat. Things were looking good. Marjorie was proving as easy as he knew she would be and it was going better than he dared hope with Jan. So good, in fact, he'd asked her out to dinner on Sunday night. He pictured her face, her cleavage, and realised she was really growing on him. If his plans for Marjorie worked out, he and Jan could look forward to some fun times together.

The next morning he woke with a headache and a metallic taste in his mouth. He struggled out of bed, a bout of coughs wracking his chest. God, he felt awful. He counted back the number of drinks he'd got through in the pub. Not enough to warrant a hangover like this. He'd have to have a word with Jan about how often she cleaned the pipes in her pub.

In the bathroom he stared in the mirror. His skin looked grey and a latticework of tiny veins marred the whites of his eyes.

"'Morning," he said dully, shuffling into the kitchen in a bathrobe and slippers.

"Daniel, are you all right?" Marjorie said, lines of concern across her forehead.

"Not so good, actually. I'm glad it's Saturday. I don't think I could have faced working today. Have you got any aspirin?"

"Yes," she said, immediately opening a cupboard and reaching up to the top shelf. He watched the flesh wobbling under her thick upper arms with disgust.

"Here we are. Now you go and sit on the sofa. Can you manage some tea and toast? I'll bring everything through."

She bustled in with a blanket shortly after, tucking it around him before carrying through a tray piled with toast, a pot of tea, a glass of milk, and two aspirin in a little pot.

"Thanks, could you pass me the remote?"

She appeared again a couple of hours later, hovering by the sofa and aggravating him with her presence. "I'm going to the cemetery today. I always take flowers for my babies on a Saturday. Do you feel up to coming? We could take some for your mother, too."

Her and those bloody babies, he thought, dragging his eyes from the TV screen. Normally a lie would appear instantly on his lips, but his mind seemed to be working sluggishly. "Erm, no. No, thanks."

"No to coming with me?"

"Yes, I still feel terrible."

"How about I take some flowers for your mother? You'll need to tell me exactly where her grave is."

He raised his fingers to his temples and shut his eyes. "No, don't worry. I'd feel guilty if you took flowers for me. It's something I'd prefer to do myself."

"Okay, then. Would you like more tea? Or an Ovaltine, perhaps?"

He looked at the huge pot, still half full. "Yes, an Ovaltine sounds good. And a couple more aspirin, please."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Once she'd gone he sat sipping his drink, swallowing down the aspirin with the last gulp. Then he kicked off the blanket, walked over to the front window, lifted the net curtain, and peered down the street. No sign of her. His temples were thudding and he realised his heart was racing uncomfortably fast as he turned to the top drawer of the dresser and took the file out.

Everything was there. Details of several savings accounts, bank cards, cheque books, even the deeds to the house. He flicked through to the back of the file, grunting incredulously when he found the sheet of paper with all the passwords for her savings accounts neatly written out. Stupid, stupid bitch. He thought forward to his meal with Jan the following evening. If everything went smoothly, he'd start draining Marjorie's accounts dry the next day. Then he could invite Jan on a luxury cruise and be out of this horrible house within a week.

He turned to the envelope at the front and counted the cash inside. Almost four hundred quid. Taking the phone and a copy of the yellow pages back to the sofa, he found the number for the bookie's he'd become a regular in. "Hi, George, it's Dan Norris here. Can I place a few phone bets?"

The keys clicked in the front door after lunch and she walked into the front room, a rosy flush on her chubby cheeks. "How are you feeling?"

"Rotten," he said, shifting on the sofa. "This headache seems to be getting worse."

"Poor baby," she said, shrugging off her coat and pressing her fingertips to his brow. "Perhaps I should take your temperature. You could be coming down with the flu. It's that time of year."

"You might be right. My joints are starting to ache, too."

She brought the thermometer through from the kitchen, perched on the edge of the sofa, and popped it in his mouth. As they waited he was aware of her large buttocks pressing against his legs. After three minutes she took it out and tilted it towards the window. "It's a bit up."

"Maybe I just need some fresh air," he said, wanting to get away from her cloying company. But when he tried to stand, the blood surged in his head and red clouds filled the room.

When he came to he was stretched back out on the sofa, the blanket now tucked up to his chin. She was sitting on the arm, looking down at him, her fat face filling his vision.

"You fainted, you poor dear. It's lucky you hadn't got to your feet."

Feeling weak as a child, he shut his eyes again. "My head's pounding. I need more aspirin."

She instantly stood. "Of course. I think you're dehydrated, I'll get you a drink, too."

When she returned a minute later he saw she was carrying a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

steaming mug and a small bottle. "I've made you some more Ovaltine. I'm afraid you've had all the aspirin. But I've got some Calpol."

"Calpol? Isn't that for kids?"

"Yes. It was for . . ." Tears brimmed in her eyes. "We'll give you an extra big dose."

Too exhausted to protest, he watched as she poured out a tablespoon of the red liquid. Once he'd swallowed it, she placed the mug of Ovaltine in his hands. "Now drink up. We can't have you like this, can we?"

He spent the rest of the evening lying on the sofa, listlessly watching the telly as his pulse rose and fell again and again. At eleven o'clock she came over and stood in front of the sofa. "I think it's beddy-bed time. Shall I help you up?"

Irritated by her patronising choice of words, he waved her away. "I'm fine here. I'll head up later."

"Head still bad?"

He nodded once. "If there's no improvement by tomorrow I think we'd better call for a doctor."

She found him there the next morning. He was lying on his back, a shallow pant coming from his mouth.

"Oh dear, still feeling poorly?"

His eyelids fluttered open and he looked at her from the corner of his eye. "I'm more than poorly. I need a doctor," he croaked, gesturing weakly to the phone which lay just out of his reach. "Can you pass it to me? I can hardly move. And bring me the copy of the yellow pages, too," he added, thinking he needed to call Jan to cancel their dinner date.

"Let me get you a drink, your throat sounds awfully dry."

"Okay. Yes, a drink would be good."

She returned a minute later with a mug in her hands. Kneeling in front of the sofa, she reached an arm round his neck and lifted his head off the cushions.

"What's this? More bloody Ovaltine? I just want water."

"Now, now," she clucked. "I've made it with milk, just how you like it. Take a sip, it's not too hot."

With a reluctant sigh, he did as he was told. Once it was finished she laid his head back down.

"Now can you please call me a doctor? I'm seriously ill here."

She picked up the phone and placed it further out of his reach. "We don't need a doctor. I'm here to take care of you."

A surge of self-pitying anger made the dull thump in his head more pronounced. "Listen, I need more than cups of bloody Ovaltine. I need medical help. Now call me a bloody doctor."

She held a finger up. "Any more language like that and I'll wash your mouth out with soap. Now let's get you upstairs, you need to be in bed."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He tried to shrug off her arm as it slid back round his neck. "Give me the phone," he gasped, thinking of Jan, the only person in the world he could turn to for help. Not caring if it meant revealing the truth about himself to her.

Ignoring his demand, she pulled him into a sitting position, then draped one of his arms round her shoulders.

"Get your hands off me," he protested feebly.

"Okay," she said brusquely. "One, two, three, up!" She hoisted him to his feet and his vision swirled and faded.

"What are you doing?" he mumbled helplessly, unsure if they were actually moving until he felt the edges of the stairs banging against his shins. "I need the toilet."

"There, there. Everything will be okay," she grunted, getting him onto the landing.

His vision cleared a little and he realised they'd stopped outside the door marked Nursery. She took a key from her pocket. His head lolled forward as she unlocked the door. The room had the letters of the alphabet running below the picture rail. The jungle-animal blind was drawn and a mobile of toy animals hung over an enormous cot in the corner.

"What . . . what is this?" he said, trying to focus.

"Don't you worry, I'm here to take care of you," she replied, lowering the bars of the cot and laying him down.

"I need the toilet. I have to go to the toilet." He started to cry.

"That's fine," she said, stripping off his pajamas and taking a pair of incontinence pants from a drawer.

He felt her slipping them on and he looked at the photos lined up on the shelf to his side. Framed photos of gaunt-faced men, all lying in the cot he now found himself in.

"Who are they?" he whispered.

"My babies, of course," she answered brightly, picking up each picture in turn. "All dead now. All dead." She looked down at him, a smile on her face. "All my babies die. It's what God wants."

He stared up at her, remembering the inscription in the cemetery about her babies being with angels, realising there were no actual names listed on the gravestone.

"Now, it's time for your feed. Mummy will get it." She raised the bars back up and he heard her go downstairs. While she was gone he tried desperately to summon the strength to move. Sobbing with exertion, he was only able to lift a hand just clear of the blanket.

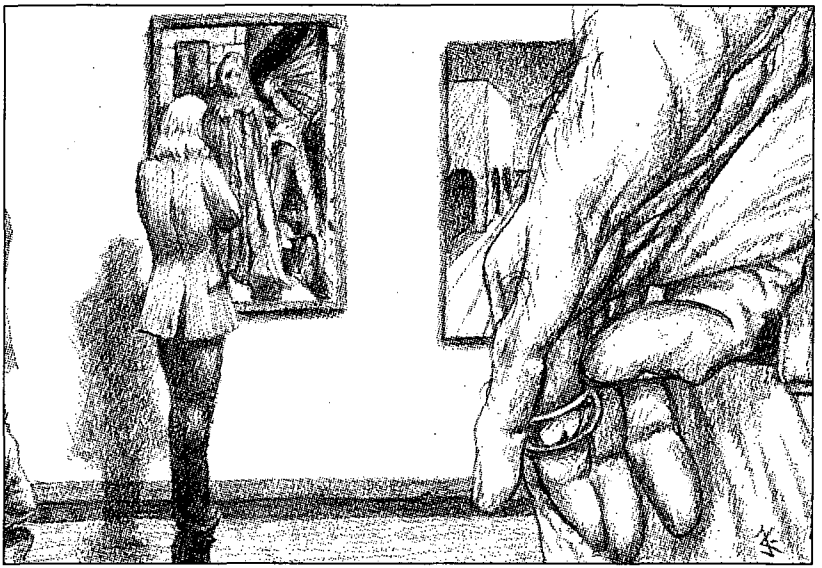
She returned with a large baby bottle, dripping a bit from the teat onto her upturned wrist. "Just right."

He tried to shy away from her as she bent over him. But she cupped his cheek and turned his face towards her.

"What's in that? What is it?" he said through gritted teeth as the teat was forced between his lips.

"Mother's milk, my sweet one. Mother's milk." ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

Don't You Hate Having Two Heads?

by Christine Poulson

He came to the Guggenheim Museum every time he visited Venice and it struck him as strange that he didn't remember seeing this sculpture before. It lay at his feet, more like a gigantic insect than the body of a woman. He was fascinated, yet he could scarcely bear to look. There was an arched backbone from which the ribs opened out like petals to the sun, little breasts like grapes above them. At one end of the spine, pipe-cleaner legs were splayed like those of a limbo-dancer. From the other end sprouted the neck, a long arc of vertebrae ending in a tiny head with a notch for a mouth. He looked at the title: "Woman With Her Throat Cut" by Alberto Giacometti. He looked again at the sculpture. A little way down the neck was a second notch. This bloodless bronze was somehow more terrible than the goriest painting could have been.

It was as he turned away that he saw the girl for the second time. He had first seen her going into the museum just ahead of him.

©2007 by Christine Poulson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He had admired the swing of her shoulder-length hair as she leaned forward to buy her ticket. When she straightened up, he realised that she was half a head taller than he was. He had always been attracted to tall women, particularly to those as elegant as this. She was wearing a fitted jacket in tan suede and high-waisted brown trousers that flattered a slender figure. And now there she was on the other side of the room gazing at a painting by Max Ernst.

He slipped off his wedding ring and pushed it deep into his trouser pocket. She was frowning a little, totally intent on the picture, and seemed not to notice as he drifted over in her direction. He glanced at the title: "The Robing of the Bride." The painting was dominated by a monstrous figure with an owl's head. Its round eyes gazed out at the spectator with an expression at once enigmatic, melancholy, and predatory. Further down, the rich orange feathers fell into the folds of a floor-length cloak from which emerged the small breasts and the gently swelling stomach of a naked female body.

"Don't you hate having two heads?" the girl murmured.

She hadn't realised that he was standing behind her. He cleared his throat. The girl looked round. Her eyes widened. She was a brown-eyed blonde, an unusual combination. He felt a little thrill of excitement and apprehension.

"Has she got two heads?" he asked.

"Yes, look, right there. See that little face peering out?" The girl had an American accent, light, attractive.

He moved forward so that he was standing next to her. He looked to where she was pointing. Just above the breasts, a tiny masklike face was peering out through the feathers.

"So there is."

"'Don't You Hate Having Two Heads?' is the title of another surrealist painting," she said. "It's by a British artist, Roland Penrose. It's kind of a joke."

He smiled at her. "I see."

She was older than he had thought. She must be about thirty, not really a girl at all. He was glad that she wasn't too young.

She pulled a notebook out of her bag. She gave him a brief smile and turned towards the seats in the center of the gallery.

The encounter was over. At least for now.

He made his way through the central gallery past the Alexander

An art historian who lives in Derbyshire, England, Christine Poulson is also the author of three mystery novels: *Dead Letters*, published in 2002 by Robert Hale in the U.K. and (as *Murder Is Academic*) by St. Martin's in 2004 in the U.S.; *Stage Fright*, published in 2003 by Robert Hale and in 2005 by St. Martin's; and *Footfall* (Robert Hale, 2006).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Calder mobile, and pushed open the door that led down to the terrace overlooking the Grand Canal. The heat enveloped him. He hadn't expected the weather to be so good in late September. It was a real Indian summer.

He gave it ten minutes, then he headed back into the museum. She wasn't in the gallery where he had left her, nor in the garden. He felt a twinge of concern, but surely she couldn't have left yet. He strolled around, hoping at any moment to catch a glimpse of the bell of blond hair, but he didn't come across her. After a while he gave up any pretence of examining the Picassos and the Jackson Pollocks and went through the rooms methodically, one by one. At last he had to admit defeat. She had gone and he had missed his chance. Stupid, stupid, stupid! Why hadn't he made a move earlier? It was a bloody nuisance just when he had psyched himself up to it. He had had so little practice, that was the trouble. He would have to mark this down to experience and start all over again.

First he would have a coffee. The museum cafe was crowded. Glancing round for a table, he saw at one end of the long narrow room a shallow flight of stairs and a sign to the museum shop. He felt a flicker of hope. As he turned the corner into the shop, he saw her standing at the counter handing money to the sales assistant and receiving a small plastic bag, the kind that contains postcards. He breathed a sigh of relief. He moved deeper into the shop and paused by a rack of silk scarves. He looked back. She had moved away from the counter and was browsing among the books. He edged round to the racks of postcards and picked out several more or less at random. Now she was leaning over a cabinet of jewellery made from Murano glass. As he watched, she straightened up and walked towards the exit. He hastened to pay for the cards and followed her out.

At first he thought she was heading for the cafe, but she turned off into the ladies' loo.

He hovered near the entrance to the shop and pretended to look at some books in a glass case. After a while she emerged and he hurried after her. He was just in time to see her sit down at a table. He looked around and felt like cheering. All the other tables were full. It couldn't have worked out better if he had planned it.

He walked over to her table.

"May I?" he said, gesturing towards the empty chair.

She nodded and smiled.

He ordered a cappuccino. When he caught her eye again, she stretched out a hand and said, "Jessica David."

There was a directness about her that threw him off balance: He almost gave his real name. Well, the Richard was real enough. But even as the word was on his lips he felt a moment of paralysing indecision. He hadn't prepared a false surname. And now she was looking into his eyes, waiting for him to go on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Richard Ford," he said firmly, remembering a moment too late that this was the name of a well-known American writer. Still, it was a common enough name.

"Are you here on holiday?" he asked.

"No, I'm a student, a postgrad."

Ten minutes later they were deep in conversation. She wasn't American at all, he learned, but Canadian. She came from Quebec. He didn't have to feign interest. He had always wanted to go there.

They reached a natural pause in the conversation. The coffee had been drunk. For a moment, neither of them spoke. She looked around. He knew she was preparing to leave.

"Is it too early for lunch?" he asked.

She hesitated and he thought he had lost her.

Then she said, "Not at all too early. In fact, I'm ravenous."

They decided on ravioli stuffed with cheese and vegetables and an insalatata mista. When Richard ordered a bottle of wine, Jessica did not demur.

As they drank the first glass, she told him about her research. She was looking at various surrealist artists from a feminist viewpoint.

"There were some women surrealists, weren't there?" Richard said, dredging his memory. "Leonora Carrington, wasn't she one? And who did that cup and saucer lined with fur?"

"Meret Oppenheim. Oh sure, there are some marvellous women surrealists, but there's another side to it. I'm interested in the way women were silenced by surrealists."

The waiter arrived with their food. Richard poured out another glass of wine for them both.

"What kind of thing have you got in mind?" he said.

"There's a prime example here in this very museum."

It was as if he could read her mind. He knew what was coming next.

"I'm thinking of that Giacometti sculpture," she said. "It's called 'Woman With Her Throat Cut.' There couldn't be a more effective way of silencing someone."

As he cast around for something to say, his eye fell on the newspaper that Jessica had left on the empty chair between them. ASSASSINIO SUL CANAL GRANDE, the headline read. Jessica followed his gaze.

"Have you heard about that?" she asked.

"I don't read Italian," he said.

"It might not be in the English-language papers yet. They only found the second body yesterday. Two in less than a week. The police think it's the work of the same person, so of course the press are making the most of it. There's a big spread about serial killers."

"How does he?—I mean, what happens—?"

"Cheese-cutter. They're garrotted with that thin strip of wire

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that you use to cut cheese."

Richard felt queasy. His head was swimming. He poured himself a glass of mineral water. He told himself that he could walk away at any moment. He didn't actually have to do anything. This was just an experiment.

Jessica began to talk about the fellowship she'd been awarded and the bad moment passed.

"So you've been here for a while?" he asked.

"Three months."

"Where are you staying?"

"I've got a room in a flat. Not far away, actually. And you?"

"A hotel in San Polo." He didn't want to be more specific.

He looked down at the table and traced a pattern in a little puddle of spilled water.

"There's always plenty to do during the day, but it can be difficult in the evenings, can't it?" she said.

He looked up. She was smiling at him.

He said, "I wonder . . . Maybe we could . . . "

"I'd like that."

"This evening?"

"Why not?"

Now that this was settled, they began to talk of other things. Richard asked her if she'd like more coffee. She said she would. He ordered it and then excused himself. In the gent's, he splashed cold water on his face and gazed at his reflection. He tried to see himself through Jessica's eyes. His hair and beard, both worn short, were greying and it suited him. Certainly he was more attractive now at forty than he had been at twenty. All the same, he couldn't believe how easy it had been, almost too easy. He found himself feeling annoyed with her for being so ready to go off with a complete stranger. Didn't she realise how dangerous it was?

He went back into the cafe.

Jessica was gazing out into the garden with her back to him. As he approached their table, her head began to turn. And out of the blue it hit him: a wave of sheer panic. Because the head that swivelled towards him as if in slow motion wasn't the head of a woman. It was the owl-head of the bride in the Max Ernst picture. The feathery hair was made of real feathers, the brown eyes were round and unblinking, the little nose was a beak with a cruel curve at the tip. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, Jessica was herself again. She was looking at him with concern.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He reached for a chair and lowered himself into it.

"Just suffering a bit from the heat."

"Would you like a glass of water?"

He nodded and she poured one out for him.

"I need to go and freshen up myself," she said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As she walked away, it occurred to him that maybe it was the heat after all. That and the alcohol. The sky was completely overcast now and yet the heat was still building. He was sweating profusely. Or maybe these were the early symptoms of food poisoning. That cuttlefish he had eaten last night . . .

But whatever had caused that momentary hallucination, he knew now that he couldn't go through with it.

The waiter appeared at his side and laid the bill on the table. He got to his feet, pulled out his wallet, and threw three twenty-euro notes on the table. He snatched up his packet of postcards, and ran out of the restaurant.

Ten minutes later he was on a vaporetto chugging up the Grand Canal towards the Rialto Bridge.

"Got your research done, darling?" Richard's wife asked.

She tossed her handbag and her newspaper onto the bed.

It was the following day and she had just arrived from Marco Polo airport. Richard had met her off the bus at the Piazza Romana and they had walked the short distance across a couple of canals to the hotel. On the way they had talked about the children, Marcus on holiday with friends for the first time and Emily at Pony Club camp. The success of Richard's last novel had made both the holiday and the Pony Club possible and had allowed Sarah to join him for a few days.

"Well, I did establish that it would be easy to pick someone up in the Guggenheim Museum."

"I told you it would be. Art galleries and museums are well-known intellectual pickup places."

Something in the silence that followed made her look round at him.

"You didn't actually pick someone up yourself?" She was laughing. "You did, didn't you?"

"I did have lunch with someone," he admitted.

"Attractive?"

"A lot of men would think so."

"But you didn't?"

"She couldn't hold a candle to you."

"Looks like I arrived just in time," she said lightly. "If you've done everything you need for the new book, maybe we can get down to some serious sightseeing."

He wasn't going to tell her that for a crazy half-hour he had contemplated taking it further. She might guess, but she wouldn't ask. She wasn't one of those tedious women who insist on having everything out in the open.

"I've found a very nice restaurant just off the Piazza Santa Margarita," Richard said. "I thought we'd go there for lunch."

"I'll just do a bit of unpacking first and maybe have a shower."

LICENSED TO LINZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

As she pottered around, he stretched out on the bed and glanced through the paper. He had more or less recovered from the day before. As he had alighted from the vaporetto, the heavens had opened. He had been soaked to the skin by the time he got to the hotel, and to cap it all he was violently sick. He only just got back to his room in time.

He'd felt better by the evening and had slipped down to the hotel restaurant for a simple pasta. He had chosen a table at the rear of the restaurant. He couldn't rid himself of the fear that Jessica was cruising the hotels of San Polo looking for him. Thank goodness he had never before been seriously tempted to be unfaithful to Sarah. He didn't have the temperament for it. Better stick to fictional adventures and leave the real ones to bolder and more unscrupulous men.

Sarah had put her clothes away and had laid out her toiletries on top of the chest of drawers. Richard's belongings were lying scattered around and she began to tidy them up. Richard found this domestic activity comforting. He went on turning over the pages of the *Guardian* which had travelled with Sarah from East Midlands Airport that morning.

His eye was caught by a headline. "DEATH IN VENICE." *"Venetian police are denying that they have a serial killer on their hands,"* he read, *"even though the killer seems to have used the same modus operandi on both victims. Apparently they were garrotted with a length of cheese-wire. In both cases, something was left by the body that leads the police to suspect that the killer is a visitor to Venice."*

"Really, Richard!" He looked up to see Sarah holding a plastic bag in one hand and a postcard in the other.

"Sorry—just let me—" His eyes went back to the newspaper.

"Both men were around forty and of a similar physical type. Both were below average height. Both were married, but police do not discount a homosexual motive."

"My God! They weren't women, they were men!"

"Richard!"

And now he did focus on what Sarah had in her hand. It was a postcard of "Woman With Her Throat Cut" by Alberto Giacometti.

"Why did you buy so many of the same thing?" she said with a moue of distaste. "There must be a dozen of them. They're really gruesome."

For a moment he was baffled. How had they got into his room? Then he understood. In his haste to leave the restaurant he had picked up the wrong plastic bag. Jessica had his Magritte and Alexander Calder postcards. He had—these.

"And that's not all. There's something else in here," Sarah said.

She turned the bag upside down above the bed.

Richard knew what would be in there even before the gleaming, tightly coiled length of cheese-wire landed on the counterpane. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PASSPORT TO CRIME

WORLD SAVINGS DAY IN HAMMINKELN

by Jürgen Ehlers

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert.

"There is a slight trend towards more personal initiative," it said in *Manager* magazine on the subject of Hartz IV, our new social-welfare program for the long-term unemployed. More personal initiative—now, I'm not sure I understand what that is, but to be honest, the first thing I noticed about myself with Hartz IV was a trend toward more personal frustration. I'm a civil engineer, fifty-five years old, and in Germany's current economic situation I could stand on my head and still nobody would hire me, a guy as old as me—with Hartz IV or without it. But then I read that part about personal initiative again, and said to myself: *Yeah, I'll do something for myself. I'll rob a bank.*

Bank robbery?—Now I know what you're going to say. Much too risky. At my age! And without any relevant professional experience. I mean, I've never done it before, and the first time you try something, a lot of things can go wrong. But you have to get past small-minded considerations like that. Otherwise we'll never get

Jürgen Ehlers was born and currently lives in Hamburg, Germany. In his "day job" he serves as a geologist whose area of expertise is the Ice Age and coastal research. His fiction output consists of more than forty stories published in Germany, England, Bulgaria and the U.S. *Mitgegangen*, his first novel (2005), was nominated in the Friedrich Glauser prize's Best Debut Novel of the Year category, and in 2006 he won the Glauser prize for Best Short German Crime Fiction with the following story.

©2005 by Jürgen Ehlers. Published as "Weltspartag in Hamminkeln" in the anthology **Mordsfeste.**
Translation ©2007 by Mary Tannert.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the economy going again, not here in the Lower Rhine.

So I went to this bar in Wesel and got some advice. (No, I'm not going to tell you the name of the place, not here in print; the publisher didn't want me to say. But if you call me up I'll give you the address.) Egon Patzek, they said. He'll do it. If you're from Wesel, you might even know him. He's always in the papers.

To be honest, at the beginning I wasn't convinced at all that this Egon was the right partner for me. He looked a little dumb. I mean, appearances can be deceiving and everything, but when I looked at Egon I had the feeling that in this case, they were a pretty good indicator. So I went back up to the manager of the bar and said I was a little worried about the qualifications of my prospective partner. But he just looked at me sideways and said, "We haven't got any Al Capones here. You've got to go to Chicago for that. Or at least Dortmund. Egon's the best guy you can find here on the Lower Rhine. He's got more prior convictions than everybody else put together."

This didn't completely eliminate my doubts. And I hadn't reckoned so much on an older guy with a beer belly. I'm imagining someone a little like John Dillinger way back when. You remember him? The 'thirties. Broke out of jail three times. Young, dynamic, jumped over the counters and stuff.

The manager just laughs when I tell him that. "Jump over the counters? What planet are you from? You try that in a bank here, you'll land smack up against the bulletproof glass! Nah, it doesn't work like that anymore!"

That's when I realize I need an expert, and I go and sit down at Egon's table. "Bank robbery?" he says. "That'll be five thousand."

"Shhhh!" I say, and tell him that actually I'm hoping we'll net at least fifty thousand from the robbery. Or even more.

Then he explains that he's not talking about the take from the heist, he's talking about the start-up capital. And that he needs it right away. "Cash."

That's how our bank robbery begins, with me taking out a loan. From the Hamminkelner Volksbank. But this way at least I get a look at the layout of the place beforehand.

We meet at my house to plan. I cleaned up everything ahead of time. I even ran the vacuum. It's been a bachelor pad since Elke left two years ago. You'd probably be able to tell from the way it usually looks. But Egon, he doesn't notice the trouble I went to. He just sprawls in a lounger, puts his dirty boots on the coffee table, and says, "First I need a beer."

So I get the beer from the fridge and bring it in with two glasses. "I only need one," says Egon. But then he doesn't even touch it, he just puts the bottle to his mouth and when he sets it down it's empty. "Have ya got any more?"

I bring another bottle. He wrenches the top off and says I'm

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

going to be getting up a lot if I keep bringing them one at a time. But finally we get around to business. I explain to him that for me this bank robbery is pretty much like a normal business transaction. "We're partners in this plan, and as business partners we should treat each other with respect."

"Huh?" says Egon.

I explain that I want us to be more formal, like people are in business, and that we shouldn't put our dirty shoes on each other's coffee tables. I can tell he has some trouble with the idea of not treating me like a beer buddy, but he does take his shoes off the table when I spread the five thousand euros out on it.

"I've got everything figured out right down to the last detail," I say. "Here's an exact plan of the bank and its surroundings."

"We don't need that," says Egon. "I know how to do this, I'll take care of it."

A week later, we meet again. I had expected that Egon would have gotten hold of a couple of guns, but instead he lays a kind of short, thin pipe on the table.

"What's that supposed to be?" I ask. "This isn't a relay race, it's a bank robbery."

Egon grins. "And that's no relay baton. It's a single-action incendiary launcher. DM 34."

"Thirty-four Deutschmark! That's seventeen euros!" I say. "That's coming out of your share!"

"No, that's its name. It's called a DM 34. I swiped it during the last reserves training weekend."

"Oh, great! And what are we supposed to do with it?"

"Scare people," says Egon. "In the bank. So they hop to it and hand the money over fast."

I don't know what to say. I look at the thing. It doesn't look very threatening to me. It's an olive-green, insignificant piece of plastic pipe, maybe about fifteen inches long.

"Never seen one?" asks Egon.

No, I'd never seen one.

"The tank destroyer troops," says Egon, obviously trying to help me out.

That doesn't mean anything to me either.

"It's like this: When the enemy's tank stalls, and that happens a lot, you know . . . "

I explain to him that I've never had that happen to me.

"Don't you ever go to the movies?"

"Not much," I say. "The last movie I saw was *Love Story*. There weren't any tanks in it."

"Sometimes they cut stuff out," says Egon. "Just when it starts to get exciting . . . " And then he tells me how it works: "So there's this enemy tank, just sitting there, and now the tank destroyer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

troops sneak up. That's you and me. You come up on one side with your Panzerfaust, you know, your bazooka, and I come up on the other, and I shoot this incendiary launcher right onto the front. There's white phosphorus in it. And magnesium. There's a big flash, and the guys in the tank, they all think: *Damn! That's an incendiary launcher*. . . . I mean, in Russian, of course. . . ."

It's becoming obvious to me that Egon's military service was a while ago.

". . . And then you come up on the other side and get them with the Panzerfaust."

"Great!" I say. "Why don't I just do that right from the start?"

Egon responds that I obviously don't have the faintest idea of modern warfare. And I remind *him* that our goal isn't actually to destroy the bank, it's just to get the money.

"Yeah, I know," he says. But the whole thing makes me uneasy, and I have the funny feeling that what interests him more than anything else is the prospect of that big flash.

When we meet in front of the bank as planned, Egon is beaming. "Did you see? Today's World Savings Day!" No, I hadn't seen. But I can smell it. Egon's saving on showers. He's probably the first bank robber in history who'll be identified in a lineup by his smell.

"I used to love that," he says. "World Savings Day! You could always get something. I'd pay in my five Deutschemark and get a piggy bank or a ruler or something. And then I'd go back the next day and take the money out again. The stuff we got—the rulers—they were in a class by themselves. They had a little knob on the top, and when you put 'em on the table upside down and turned 'em fast enough, they'd spin in a circle. For ages. We used to do that all the time at school. . . ."

"Yes," I say. It figures. Egon is exactly the kind of person who'd have spent nine or ten years in school making a ruler spin in a circle.

"D'you think they still have stuff like that?"

I reminded him that this was about money, not rulers.

"Yeah," he says. "I understand."

Egon gets the motorcycle helmets out of the car. We need them so that none of the stuff in the incendiary launcher drips on our heads when Egon fires the warning shot.

"We'd better put something in the parking meter," I say.

"World Savings Day!" he says. "Nobody's paying."

We're the only customers in the bank. Naturally everybody stares at us when we come in with the helmets on.

"Get going!" I call out. "Out with the money! Pack it up!"

But evidently you can't hear too much through a motorcycle hel-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

met. The young man in the cashier's booth just says, "Can I help you?"

So I write it down for him. The cashier looks at the note, and then at the two of us standing there with our motorcycle helmets and our little green pipe. And then he says, "Gentlemen, I believe you've forgotten your pistols!"

Egon lets off a warning shot, diagonally into the ceiling. At first, it doesn't seem like much of an effect. Since then I've learned there's a minimum distance you have to shoot for the incendiary launcher to really work, and that distance is at least further than the height of the cashier's booth at the Hamminkelner Volksbank. But it isn't as if nothing at all happens when you shoot it under the minimum distance. There's a loud bang, a piece of soundproof paneling in front of me breaks into bits, and a couple of seconds later, white phosphorus starts to drip from the ceiling directly into the cashier's booth. The cashier screams and runs for safety, but then the bank notes on the counter inside the booth catch fire and start to burn.

Egon yells something inside his helmet. It might have been something like, "Quick, quick! Rescue the money!" He runs down the counter to the spot where the investment adviser is sitting, throws himself over, runs back up, and tries to get into the cashier's booth from the back, but the door's shut behind the cashier and can't be opened without the key.

Meanwhile, I'm waving the incendiary launcher around. I'm lucky I've got that helmet on; that way, you can't see that I'm panicking. I'm hoping the thing doesn't go off by mistake. Then Egon gives up trying to get into the cashier's booth. He tears off his helmet, grabs the investment adviser's ruler, and yells, "Let's get out of here!"

And we lurch out.

The first thing I see is that our car's gone. It's probably been towed because we didn't put any money in the meter. "That doesn't matter," gasps Egon. "We'll just go take it. They park 'em all next to the cemetery. I've been there before. . . ."

But we don't get that far, because naturally someone in the bank has long since set off the alarm and the cops are already coming. A squad car with its lights and siren on. We take off and run as hard as we can. Egon's faster than me; he turns around and sees I'm losing ground. He yells, "Step on it, you fat ass!"

I give him a reproachful look, and he pulls himself together. "Mr. Wohlers, could you please hand me your incendiary launcher?"

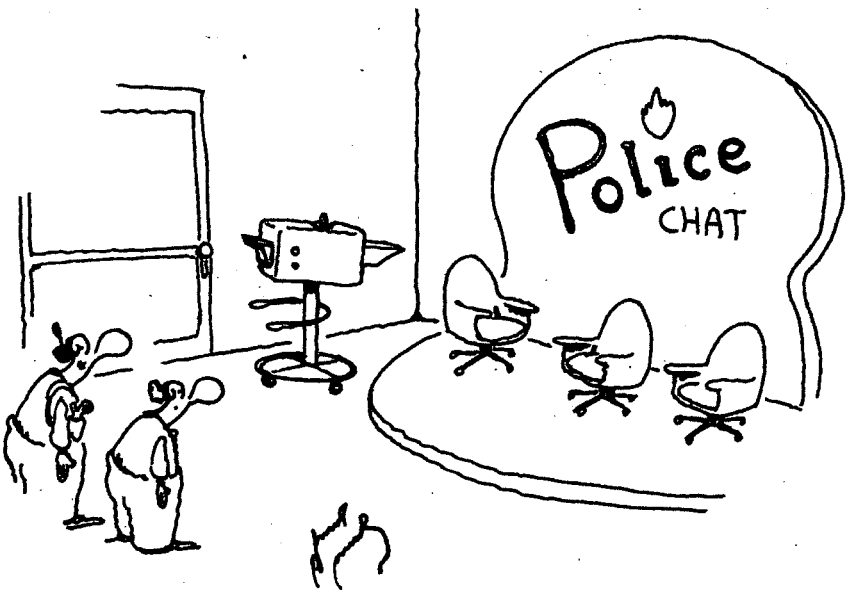
He's right, I still have the stupid thing in my hand. And then it turns into a kind of relay race after all; he slows down just a little, and I hand him the baton. The squad car's getting closer. Suddenly, Egon stops and aims with the incendiary launcher. I throw myself to the ground, and—*boom!*—the thing goes off with a loud

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whoosh. This time, the distance is perfect, and the squad car disappears in a bright magnesium flash. "Super, just like James Bond!" says Egon excitedly. But that's all he says: my partner's standing there, his face all lit up with a stupid grin, the discharged pipe in his hand, and meanwhile the cops have long since jumped out of their car, pulled out their guns, and got him by the collar.

At first, they don't even see me. And I might have gotten away if I hadn't twisted my ankle diving to avoid the shot. I can barely stand. By the time I've gotten up on my feet again and can try limping away, they've got me too. They take us both away. Egon's crying. His ruler got broken in the scuffle.

So now I'm sitting here where it's warm and dry, and I've gotten around Hartz IV after all. At least for now. Because my lawyer says he's not sure I'll even have to do any time. The papers wrote "armed robbery," but that's wrong. A DM 34 isn't a weapon, it's just a non-lethal diversionary device, and it has to be classified differently, sort of like July 4th fireworks. At least, my lawyer thinks so. He wants to get all kinds of expert witnesses and specialists involved. And that will take awhile. But if I'm lucky, he says, we'll be out by the middle of October. Right in time for the next World Savings Day. ●



"It's a little unorthodox for an interrogation room, but it makes them sing like canaries."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pool Players Are Nice People

by William Bankier

In his quiet way, William Bankier sometimes portrays some pretty hardboiled characters, including hit men and mobsters. A Canadian by birth, Mr. Bankier has been a resident of Los Angeles for many years. But his favorite fictional setting seems to be the idealized Canadian small town he calls Baytown; for several decades he's placed all manner of interesting characters there.

Jason Kirby was on the telephone to Oscar Macrobie at the head office of the Macro Hotel chain in Montreal. "Have you found a place to live?" the boss enquired.

"I'm renting a room in a very nice cottage belonging to a Miss Delacourt. It's walking distance from the new hotel site. In Baytown, everything is walking distance."

"What's your distance from Miss Delacourt?"

"Chief, she's the local librarian."

"Even better," Macrobie said, and both men indulged in some dirty laughter. Then it was back to business. "Any further noise from irate citizens?"

Kirby was on a pay phone in the Paragon Cafe up the street from the excavation. He could see a dozen or so people holding signs and walking in a slow procession. He described this to his boss. Then he said, "They really loved their Coronet Hotel."

"It was a dump. Ready to fall down. In a year and a half they'll be drinking and dining at the new Macro Tower. They'll forget there ever was a Coronet."

Kirby went over a hang-up in the delivery of construction materials and how he was taking care of it. Macrobie asked him if he expected any trouble in the hiring of staff. "Not really. The locals need jobs. Baytown is no different from any other place."

The Montreal visitor walked out of the cafe with a feeling of relief. Oscar was an okay boss but it was stressful talking to him. One of the better things about the Baytown assignment was it

©2007 by William Bankier

COPYRIGHTED UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

took him out of the head office. No chance here that Macrobie would suddenly appear in Kirby's office doorway wearing his million-dollar suit and flashing his sinister grin. The old man made no attempt to hide his underworld connections. The story was that in the early days he buried a competitor in the foundation of his first hotel. Today he was a jovial glad-hander but the menace was always there.

The picketers saw Kirby approaching and they met him with a volley of boos and whistles. He responded with his usual over-the-head victory sign. The crew were working. Thankfully, the last remnants of the old building had been trucked away.

"Where is your peerless leader?" he asked one of the demonstrators.

"Sammy is buying the dynamite. As soon as your Macaroni Hotel sticks its head above the ground we intend to blow it to hell."

These Baytown people were something different in Kirby's experience. They embodied a combination of humor and ferocity. He found it appealing. "I'll tell Mr. Macaroni next time I speak to him."

Kirby knew that Sammy was Sam Luftspring, a former bellboy who had been promoted to desk clerk, and by the time the Coronet was demolished he was manager. Today he seemed to be the organizing force behind the anti-Macro rebellion. The men had met a couple of times and had achieved a relationship of mutual respect.

"It's Friday," Kirby addressed the gathering. "Why don't you nice people take the weekend off?"

"It's pleasant down by the Bay. Why don't you drop in?"

Late in the afternoon Kirby wandered up to the public library and went inside. Isobel Delacourt was behind the front desk. She looked like a schoolgirl with her blond head lowered to the paper she was writing on and there was an appealing determination in the way she gripped the pen. As Kirby approached, she looked up and observed him as if she had never seen him before. He said, "It's Friday. My third weekend in your fair city. Why don't you and I go somewhere?"

"Nice of you to ask, but I think not."

"Any particular reason?"

"Yes. If people saw us together they'd brand me a traitor."

"You're renting me a room in your house."

"I know. I wasn't concentrating."

"You realize you're driving me to solitary drinking."

"If that's your way."

"You won't reconsider?"

"I have work to do. I'll be here for hours."

"I could pick you up."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Mr. Kirby, you seem a nice man. You're quiet around the house. And neat. But you're involved in a very unpopular enterprise. I was born here. My parents took me once a week to the Coronet dining room. Don't you see? I can't go out with you."

Jason Kirby ended up that evening at Hagerty's Poolroom. It was in the same block as Carlo's Canteen, where he dined alone on spaghetti Bolognese washed down with three large mugs of beer.

The glass panel in Hagerty's front door had the word "Billiards" on it and was curtained two-thirds of the way up from the bottom. It was as if diminutive Baytowners must be prevented from observing the skullduggery going on inside this den of iniquity. Since day one, Kirby had found it to be a tranquil paradise. The men and boys shooting pool said very little as they sighted along their cues. An occasional prediction was spoken in a monotone. "Pink in the side pocket." "Black in the corner." The sound of balls caroming off each other, the squeak of chalk being applied to a cue tip, laughter over a prodigious shot . . . these sounds to Kirby were like surf on a beach in his native California.

The job opportunity in Canada had come at a fortunate time. His girlfriend had landed a part in a TV sitcom. She was full of herself and wanted marriage, for which he was far from ready. Oscar Macrobie arrived in Los Angeles on business and took a shine to Kirby, who was assistant manager at the hotel where he was staying. Next thing he knew, Kirby was enjoying Montreal winters and a lot more money.

A bell jingled as the poolroom door opened. At first Kirby did not recognize the man who came in. He was accustomed to seeing Sammy Luftspring in T-shirt, work pants, and sneakers. Now here he was in a dark green corduroy jacket with all three buttons fastened over a white shirt and striped tie. His pale jeans were tailored and he was wearing what Kirby thought of as cartoon shoes—round shiny blue toe-caps and thick laces. The dark snap-brimmed straw hat was tipped at a jaunty angle.

Kirby got off his chair and extended a hand. He said, "Very pretty, Sam. Very *GQ*."

Luftspring's response was, "What you see when you don't have a gun." But his tone of voice was cordial.

The front table was not occupied. Sam took a cue from the rack. "Feel like having your butt whipped?"

Kirby began looking for a cue. "You'll have to explain this snooker pool to me. Back in L.A. we played nine-ball."

Sam drove the cue ball into the triangle of reds but nothing went in. "You pot a red. Then you pot a colored ball—yellow is worth two points, green three, brown four. Black is best, it's worth seven. We keep replacing the colored balls until all the reds are

ARCHIVED BY UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gone. Then we sink the colors in order and the game is over. And you pay."

Kirby was feeling confident. "Want to put five bucks on the game?"

"No. I want to put ten."

"You're on. And I'm playing you for that hat."

The Baytowner took off the hat and the shades. His hair was in a medium buzz-cut with golden color on the ends. The expression in the pale green eyes was mild, but his thin lips were set in a determined line.

Back in L.A. Kirby had spent much of his Hollywood High after-school hours in poolrooms. That was years ago, but the time away from the table seemed to have subtracted nothing from his game. He could not miss. The reds went down one after another, followed each time by one of the more valuable colored balls.

As he tossed a ten-dollar bill on the table Sam said, "I'm in with a shark. It's Macaroni Fats."

Kirby laughed as he took the money. "If Mr. Macrobie ever pays a visit, don't let him hear what you've done to his name."

The men played until midnight, then went to get some food at the Paragon. As they slid into a booth, Kirby spotted Isobel Delacourt seated opposite a middle-aged man who was about sixty pounds overweight. He asked Sam, keeping his voice down, "Is that her father?"

"That's Greb, our chief of police."

"Talk about an odd couple."

"Not really. The police station is one block away from the library," Sam said with Baytown logic.

Over steak and fries the men got onto the subject of the new hotel. "You and your people are mad at the wrong party," Kirby said. "Your beef should be with the guy who sold the Coronet. Danforth?"

"His wife died last year. They had no kids. He could not hack living alone among all the familiar things and places. We talked about it. So he accepted the Macro offer and took off for Miami Beach."

"The new hotel is a *fait accompli.* Why not just accept it? I'll be hiring soon. You could land a good job. Pays better than your old one."

"Long after we're both dead and gone, people in town will be mourning the passing of the Coronet." Then Sam said with mock disgust, "*Fait accompli* . . . you French guys!"

An hour later, Kirby used his key to let himself into Isobel's cottage. He found her seated at the kitchen table with a copy of the *Baytown Banner* spread in front of her. She did not appear to have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been reading. Without preamble she said, "Chief Greb and I are old friends. His wife died two years ago."

"So I heard."

"He's a nice man."

"And it's a fine thing that you're out there ministering to the bereaved."

"You're feisty tonight. How much beer did you drink?"

"I was in Hagerty's shooting pool with Sam Luftspring. He's another nice man. Pool players are nice people."

Isobel Delacourt folded the newspaper and set it aside. "The Coronet Hotel was a landmark in this town. It was unique. The Danforths ran it with class and distinction. You've no idea the pain it caused when your wrecker's ball smashed it to rubble and dust. And what will you put in its place? A ten-story carbon copy of numberless hotels around the world. There'll be good plumbing but no character."

Kirby waited for her to go on, but the librarian had no more to say. He headed for his room. "I'm tired," he said. "I'm turning in. And no, thank you, I won't have a nightcap."

Oscar Macrobie summoned Kirby back to Montreal for an important meeting. When he got off the train, the metropolis seemed crowded and noisy. Was Baytown turning him into a rube, a hick? The boss covered a few topics he could have mentioned on the telephone. Then he got up and closed his office door and came back saying, "Here's the reason I called you in. The Sam Luftspring problem has been taken care of. I spoke to Ziggy Cappelini."

"Oscar, that isn't necessary."

"You've done nothing but complain about how he's organizing the demonstrators."

"Yes, but the work is going ahead."

"I know what I'm doing, Jason. Macro Tower is only the beginning. I have plans. We're going to expand the arena. Put in an artificial ice plant. Get a franchise for an International Hockey League team. They'll be a farm club for the Canadiens. I intend to put a roof over the market square. It'll be the town's first mall."

Kirby said nothing.

"I know small towns. Everybody knows everybody and nothing happens. I'm giving that place a kick-start." Macrobie tipped back in his swivel chair and propped his boots on the desk. "Anyway, you can forget about this Luftspring character. His contract is bought and paid for."

The conductor called "Baytown!" and the train rolled through freight yards approaching the station. Kirby grabbed his overnight bag and edged between seats to the doorwell. He was first one off and was confronted by Sammy Luftspring as soon as

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he came through the waiting room and emerged onto the parking lot.

"Sam, I'm glad you're here."

"Your phone call said it was urgent."

"Better safe than sorry, man."

They sat in Sam's pickup truck as Kirby explained Macrobie's decision to have the hotel organizer killed. "He said the contract is bought and paid for."

"I thought things like that only happen in movies and crime novels."

Kirby explained, "He came out of the construction business. There was always a mob affiliation. He's done this before. He gets it done so he remains in the clear."

"Telling me can't be doing you any good."

"It's in my interest to protect you, Sam. I need somebody to beat at snooker."

The few passengers off the train had come straggling onto the parking lot. The men in the truck cab watched the last of them drive away. Then Sam said, "I need something from you, Jason. You have to tell me when it's going to happen."

"I don't know, and it's hard to ask Macrobie. But it will be sooner rather than later. He wants the agitation to stop."

Sam turned the key and started the engine. "Then I'd better drop in at Hagerty's right now. Talk to some of the boys who hunt."

Kirby drove to Isobel Delacourt's cottage and went inside. The place smelled of beef roasting in the oven. Isobel met him in the kitchen doorway wearing an apron. She said, "Supper is ready in about twenty minutes. We have time for a cocktail before we eat."

"To what do I owe this hospitable behaviour?"

"I've heard how you're conducting yourself with Sam Luftspring. Wash up and meet me in the dining room."

Back from the bathroom, accepting a dry martini, Kirby said, "Sam is in trouble. I just told him what's coming from Montreal." He explained about the contract and Sam's reaction—meeting force with force in the shape of friends with guns. "Somebody is bound to get hurt," he concluded, "if not killed."

Over the roast beef with new potatoes, baby carrots, and small onions, accompanied by a New York red wine, Isobel said, "There could be an answer to this."

"I'd be glad to hear it."

"You'll have to find out when and where the assassin is going to show up."

"Not easy, but possible."

"Then it's a matter of learning from a famous event in history. I was reading about it last week in the library. Maybe you saw the movie."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I see a lot of movies."

"This one is a classic. Kirk Douglas played the title role. *Spartacus.*"

Kirby seldom telephoned his boss in Montreal; the communications usually flowed the other way. "What's going on?" Macrobie challenged him. "Are you in trouble?"

"I was thinking about the contract."

"Not on an open telephone line. Are you stupid?"

"The contract for the architect. I need to know when he will arrive in town."

"Why do you need to know that?"

"Because the guy the architect wants to see is not easy to find these days. I can be of help with that. I can bring both parties together. So the meeting will be quick and clean."

"Got it. He leaves here tomorrow morning. Should arrive early afternoon. Be at the construction site. He's got your name."

Kirby went looking for Sam. He found him at Hagerty's poolroom. A four-hander of pea-pool was in progress, so Kirby had to wait. One player shook a leather bottle containing the peas, which were small and made of wood and had numbers on them. These were distributed to the players and were kept secret; the number you received was your ball. If a player potted your ball, you paid him a dollar. If you potted your own ball, the game was over and everybody paid you five bucks.

Sam won and was folding the cash he had collected when he came to sit beside Kirby, who said, "I have good news."

"Say on."

"There won't have to be any shooting. There's a better way to handle this."

"I already lined up the hunters."

"You'll still need them, but without guns. Did you see the movie *Spartacus*?"

Sam had seen it, so the explanation was easy. All that was needed was a place for Sam and his friends to congregate. They decided on the arena, which was close to the police station. This would make it convenient for Chief Greb to come over and make an arrest.

"You said tomorrow?"

"Early afternoon."

"It's a cute trick you've figured out," Sam said. "I hope it works."

The hit man showed up looking like a tourist, right down to the pork-pie hat with a few fishing licenses pinned to it. Kirby introduced himself and said, "He's around the corner at the arena. I'll take you there."

"Then disappear. It's better if nobody sees it happen."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kirby walked the gunman to the arena entrance. "He's in there. I told him a union organizer was coming from Montreal to help sort out a compromise with the demonstrators."

The gunman went inside. Kirby waited a few moments, then opened the door quietly and moved to where he could have a clear view of the roomy interior. The ploy was underway. The fake fisherman was looking up at rows of empty seats. Halfway up was a congregation of about twenty young men. Sammy was among them.

"I'm looking for Sam Luftspring," the confused stranger said. "The rest of you better get lost."

Sam stood up and said, "I am Sammy Luftspring."

The man next to him rose and said, "I am Sammy Luftspring." A man in the top row echoed the statement: "I am Sammy Luftspring." The tempo of the voices increased as man after man got to his feet. "I am Sammy Luftspring." "I am Sammy Luftspring."

While this was going on, the door opened quietly behind Kirby and in came Chief Greb in full uniform and looking very authoritative. By now, all the men were standing and continuing to insist, "I am Sammy Luftspring." Their voices reverberated in the empty arena.

"There's your man," Kirby told Greb. "The one with the gun in his hand."

The chief unholstered his own weapon and approached the assassin from behind. He pressed the muzzle of his gun against the stranger's back. "Stand very still," he said. "You are under arrest." With his free hand, Greb took possession of the other gun. "You mustn't come to Baytown and threaten people. I have an empty cell at the station. You can cool your heels while I decide what to do with you."

Kirby showed up at the library late in the afternoon. He reported to Isobel the success of her Spartacus deception. The hit man had been photographed and documented and then escorted well along the Montreal highway by Chief Greb himself on a motorcycle. The chief would later say it was the most fun he had experienced in years.

"So you've done well, Isobel. And now I need something else from you. Would the library have a photograph of the Coronet Hotel as it looked in the good old days?" Within a few minutes she was able to produce a coffee-table book of Baytown landmarks. She turned the pages and showed Kirby a panoramic view of the hotel's facade, its neon sign, and its canopy leading to the brass-plated front doors.

"Perfect," Kirby said. "Can I take this away for a few days? I want to show it to my boss."

"Of course. But all it shows is what's been taken from us."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

❖ ❖ ❖

Oscar Macrobie stared at the giant book laid open on his desk. "What's this supposed to do for me?"

Kirby explained, "The hit man failed. You've already said you can't go down that road again. But you're still faced with the opposition of the Baytown population. And it won't go away."

"What's your point?"

"We still proceed with the construction of the ten-story tower. But at ground level, we reproduce this facade exactly as you see it here. And you call the place the New Coronet Hotel. The people will love it. And they'll love you for being so caring of their feelings."

The tycoon lit a new cigar. He said, "But I've always had my name on my hotels."

"You've got more things happening in Baytown than the hotel," Kirby said. "How about the Oscar Macrobie Arena!"

Years later the newest Baytowner, Jason Kirby, was settled in a smart cottage on the south shore. His wife Isobel, still radiant following ten days in Montreal to celebrate their second anniversary, said over breakfast, "How does Sam like being manager of a major-league hotel?"

"He says a hotel is a hotel. Much of the staff are the old-timers from the Coronet. And he says hotel guests remain in two divisions: those who pay in advance and those who do a moonlight flit."

"That's vintage Luftspring."

"I'll tell him you said so."

"Are you seeing him today?"

"At three-thirty. When I chair the monthly meeting of all the heads of Macrobie Enterprises."

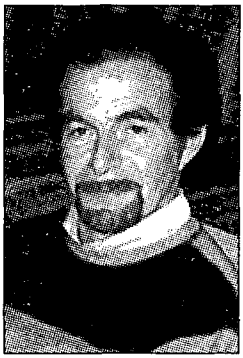
The meeting went well. Heading the boss's corporation was easy work. And best of all, he got to live in Baytown. He cornered Sam after the meeting and said, "Feel like a couple of beers?"

"You know me," Sam said. "And later on we can head over to the Macaroni Arena and catch the hockey game."

Kirby smiled to himself. The boss could tie him to a chair and torture him . . . he would never reveal that name. ●

NOTE TO READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address so that we can contact them, too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Doug Allyn

L. Leigh

Edward D. Hoch

2006 READERS AWARD

Genre-fiction magazines have been responsible for launching the careers of dozens of authors who went on to shine in their various fields. *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories began in the 1940s as a space reserved for newcomers in a magazine that regularly featured the "big names" in mystery. We've continued that tradition through the decades, and the series entries include some short-story gems.

For most editors, pulling the work of an unknown author from the slush pile and bringing it into print is one of the most gratifying experiences of the job. When the readership responds by seeing what we've seen in the story, it's even better. Your choice this year for the top Readers Award spot was a Department of First Stories tale by Leigh Lundin, a Floridian who wrote under the pseudonym L. Leigh. In "Swamped" (August 2006), Mr. Lundin took readers on an Everglades adventure featuring characters that he says are "not entirely whole cloth. The trapper in the story, Max, died just days after learning that this story had been published. As for the professor, let's just say that he is a composite." The story's animals are also very familiar to the author, who has "raised foxes, ferrets, flying squirrels . . . and yes, an alligator named Albert."

Until 1991, Leigh Lundin was a high-end software designer whose programs were purchased by airlines, car companies, clothing manufacturers, and other major corporations. By age fifteen, however, he had already sold his first newspaper article and he always continued to write. In 1991 he closed his computer consulting company and became a full-time freelance writer, producing articles for technical and sporting magazines. After selling "Swamped" to *EQMM*, he completed the first in a projected series of mystery novels, *Whirlpool* (as yet unpublished), set in the mythical Florida town of Palmetto Beach, with a soft-boiled police-chief hero.

Second place this year goes to Doug Allyn for the darkly evocative story "The Black Chapel" (September/October 2006). A perennial

L. Leigh photo by Charles Libby Photography, Orlando

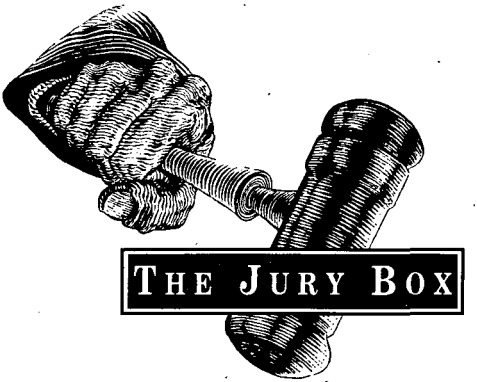
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

favorite of *EQMM* readers, Mr. Allyn claimed a Readers Award scroll this time with the return of his series character Dan Shea from the roughneck crew of contractor/builders who ply their trade in Michigan's north woods. The author has seven previous first-place finishes for the *EQMM* Readers Award, and he has earned more (seven!) Edgar Allan Poe Award nominations for his short stories than any other author in the history of the Edgars. It's also worth mentioning that his very first short story claimed the 1986 Robert L. Fish Award. His success with the short story sometimes overshadows the fact that Mr. Allyn is also an esteemed novelist whose critically acclaimed *The Burning of Rachel Hayes* was issued in paperback toward the end of 2005. But after twenty years as a published author, fiction-writing is still the second of Doug Allyn's careers in the arts. Until recently he, his wife Eve, and their band performed music regularly in clubs all over Michigan, and he tells us that music will always be a central part of his life.

This year's three winning stories have one striking similarity, different as they are in most respects: All employ interestingly unusual settings. In L. Leigh's tale it's a remote area of swampland, in Doug Allyn's an abandoned cathedral with a dark past, and in Edward D. Hoch's third-place story "A Convergence of Clerics" (December 2006), the closed world of a cruise ship at sea. Ed Hoch has an enormous following among *EQMM* readers, something we know from the frequent letters we receive about him. But with votes from his fans split among the many stories he contributes each year, he rarely receives enough votes for any single story to reach the Readers Award's winners circle. This year, when he brought back series character Susan Holt after an eight-year hiatus, he could have no idea how well she and her new case would be received, but he tells us that winning a scroll for the story may inspire him to bring the series back again soon. Mr. Hoch is an MWA Grand Master, a Lifetime Achievement award winner of the Private Eye Writers of America, and a winner of the Edgar and Anthony awards.

Fourth	"The Theft of the Blue-Ribbon Pie" by Edward D. Hoch
Fifth	"When the Levees Break" by O'Neil De Noux
Sixth *(tied)*	"Wolves in Winter" by Steve Hockensmith
	"The Precision of the Agent of Death" by Isaka Kotaro
Seventh	"The Book of Truth" by Nancy Pickard
Eighth *(tied)*	"Framed" by James H. Cobb
	"The Right Call" by Brendan DuBois
Ninth *(tied)*	"Arizona Heat" by Clark Howard
	"Dead Even" by Clark Howard
	"Babysitter" by Joyce Carol Oates
	"Investment in Vevey" by Olen Steinhauer
Tenth *(tied)*	"Lost Luggage" by Mick Herron
	"The Problem of the Devil's Orchard" by Edward D. Hoch
	"The Alimony Prison" by Lou Manfredo

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

As the Manhattan "bigs" troll for the next blockbuster while dropping worthy writers right and left, bread-and-butter mystery practitioners and their readers turn more and more to regional and independent publishers, some well-established and carefully-edited, and others unfamiliar and variable.

*** Robert S. Napier: *Love, Death, and the Toyman,* Five Star, $25.95. Jack Lorentz, a Tacoma-based collectible toy dealer, is asked by an old lover to look into a mysterious death on the property of her husband's wealthy and influential family. The first novel from the longtime fanzine editor known as Cap'n Bob is a commendable job, including surprising variations on familiar hardboiled elements: the rocky romance, the dysfunctional rich, and the hero's loyal but somewhat unstable sidekick.

*** Kit Ehrman: *Triple Cross,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Steve Cline, in Louisville to help his trainer father prepare a horse for the Kentucky Derby, winds up in the middle of a murder investigation. An impressive thriller in the Dick Francis mode, with strong equine background, clued detection, smooth style, intriguing characters, and an inventive plot.

*** John R. Corrigan: *Out of Bounds,* Hardscrabble/University Press of New England, $24.95. PGA pro Jack Austin's latest case, involving whispers of performance-enhancing drug use, is even more steeped in golf than previous novels in the series. It may not hold the interest of a reader uninterested in the sport, but players and fans will love it. As usual, Jack turns to the poetry of Philip Levine for wisdom and inspiration.

*** Janet LaPierre: *Family Business,* Perseverance, $13.95. One year after 9/11, a peace demonstration in the California coastal town of Port Silva ends in violence: two unidentified men fall over a cliff, presumably to their deaths. Mother/daughter private eyes Patience and

©2007 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Verity Mackellar do most of the detective work, but the town is the star of this involving and solidly professional addition to a well-regarded series.

** Patrick Hyde: *The Only Pure Thing,* Beckham, $14.95. Washington D.C. attorney Stuart Clay defends a crazy-but-lucid homeless man accused of a beheading murder. Until the ludicrously over-the-top events of the closing chapters, I wondered why this well-written thriller, for all its editing and proofreading lapses, wasn't picked up by a major publisher. Its insider insights on the legal system, vivid characters, and fresh plot ideas suggest this lawyer-turned-novelist may have better books to come.

** Karen MacInerney: *Murder on the Rocks,* Midnight Ink, $12.95. Natalie Barnes, proprietor of the Gray Whale Inn on Maine's Cranberry Island and leader of a local group determined to save the tern from encroaching development, has among her guests the obnoxious developer-in-chief. Pluses: characters, style, background, and recipes. Minuses: incessant repetition and plot clichés. (The second in the series, *Dead and Berried* [same publisher and price], was announced for early 2007.)

** L.C. Hayden: *Why Casey Had to Die,* Five Star, $25.95. Retired Dallas cop Harry Bronson serves as consultant to a mystery-game conference in small-town Arizona while reexamining an unsolved case from early in his career. Hayden's prose, dialogue, and plotting are undistinguished, but her knack for gripping the reader is undeniable.

** Ed Lynskey: *The Dirt-Brown Derby,* Mundania, $12. Private eye Frank Johnson is asked by the owner of a Virginia stud farm to prove her teenage daughter, ostensibly trampled by her horse, was really murdered. In contrast to Hayden, Lynskey is stylistically ambitious with nice narrative touches and observations, but irrelevant side issues and extraneous detail sabotage the flow.

Independent presses are also the most prolific reprinters of long-lost crime fiction. Rue Morgue Press, specializing in humorous and traditional mysteries, adds Kelley Roos's 1944 novel *Sailor, Take Warning!* ($14.95), involving an impossible crime among Central Park's toy boat enthusiasts, to its previous reprints about Jeff and Haila Troy, this department's favorite detecting couple.

Greatest independent of them all, at least in terms of big-name roster, is Crippen & Landru. The specialist in single-author short-story collections has its first multi-hand anthology in *The Verdict of Us All: Stories by the Detection Club for H.R.F. Keating* ($20 trade paper, $43 hardcover), edited by Peter Lovesey, in which British authors as distinguished as P.D. James, Len Deighton, and Reginald Hill offer original stories in 80th-birthday tribute to the distinguished novelist and critic, a beloved figure in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mystery world for his kindness and humanity as much as for the high quality of his writing. Series characters on board include Tim Heald's too-long-absent comic sleuth Simon Bognor and Colin Dexter's Inspector Lewis, whom a fictional version of Keating himself challenges with a puzzle to delight the late Chief Inspector Morse. Nearly all the stories, many playfully humorous (Simon Brett's is in verse) and a few very serious, are good. This department's favorites came from Catherine Aird, editor Lovesey, Robert Barnard, and (despite some errors in American English) Andrew Taylor. Keating himself is represented by an Inspector Ghote tale previously published in *EQMM*.

Keating is an example of a "writer's writer," one whose success with the general public (however great) is exceeded by the reverence accorded by other writers. Another such was Fredric Brown. As Bill Pronzini's substantial introduction to his experimental 1950 crime novel *Here Comes a Candle* (Millipede, $14) points out, not all of Brown's alternative narrative riffs (radio drama, motion picture, sportscast, stage play, early TV show) are equally successful, but the depictions of mid-20th-century angst, off-kilter psychology, and an internal battle of conscience are remarkable.

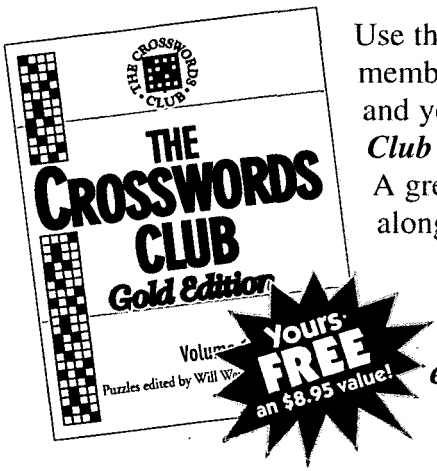
A present-day "writer's writer" is Ed Gorman, whose complete short stories will be published in a seven-volume set from a British publisher. The first two volumes of *The Collected Ed Gorman* (PS Publishing, $45 each), *Out There in the Darkness,* introduced by Lawrence Block, and *The Moving Coffin,* introduced by Max Allan Collins, contain 19 and 20 stories respectively, most previously collected, with a concluding section of story notes by the author. "Mom and Dad at Home" and "Beauty," two chilling tales in volume one, and the novelette "Intent to Deceive," a grimly realistic view of the World War II home front in volume two, were new to me. Gorman is one of our finest contemporary short-story writers regardless of genre.

The Best of "10-Story Book" (Ramble House, $22), edited by Chris Mikul, gathers 34 stories from a magazine edited from 1919 to 1940 by Harry Stephen Keeler, who denounced the formulas and taboos of most magazine fiction of his time. Offbeat stories, not all criminous, by such familiar names as Carroll John Daly, Kenneth Fearing, August Derleth, Vincent Starrett, Harold Q. Masur, Len Zinberg (later known to mystery readers as Edgar winner Ed Lacy), and Keeler himself, share the pages with nude photos, daringly risqué at the time but innocent by current standards. Based on my sampling, a remarkable collection. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FREE BONUS BOOK

With every gift membership to The Crosswords Club!



Use the coupon below to give a gift membership to **The Crosswords Club** and you'll receive ***The Crosswords Club Gold Edition*** book **FREE!** A great gift for yourself...or to give along with your gift subscription!

64 pages packed with some of our most entertaining puzzles ever!

The Crosswords Club delivers a monthly supply of 6 high-quality themed crosswords, printed on durable paper that's a pleasure to write on. It's a superb gift sure to delight the most discerning crossword solvers you know.

THE CROSSWORDS CLUB

Order TOLL-FREE: 1-800-433-4386 (8am-7pm, EST)

Mail to: ***The Crosswords Club*** • *Dept. S, 6 Prowitt St.* • *Norwalk, CT 06855-1220*

❑ ***YES!*** Enter a 1-year gift membership to **The Crosswords Club** (XWC) at $39.95 and send me *The Crosswords Club Gold Edition Vol. 1* (XWGFR) for **FREE!**

❑ Send me _____ copies of *The Crosswords Club Gold Edition Vol. 1* (XWG01) at $8.95 plus $1.50 shipping & handling each ($10.45 per book).

Allow up to 4 weeks for delivery of first issue. **Outside the USA:** Canada and Mexico add $10 per membership per year. All other foreign countries add $25 per membership per year. Add an additional $3 shipping and handling for book orders ($13.45 total, US funds).

Send to _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Your name _____

Address _____

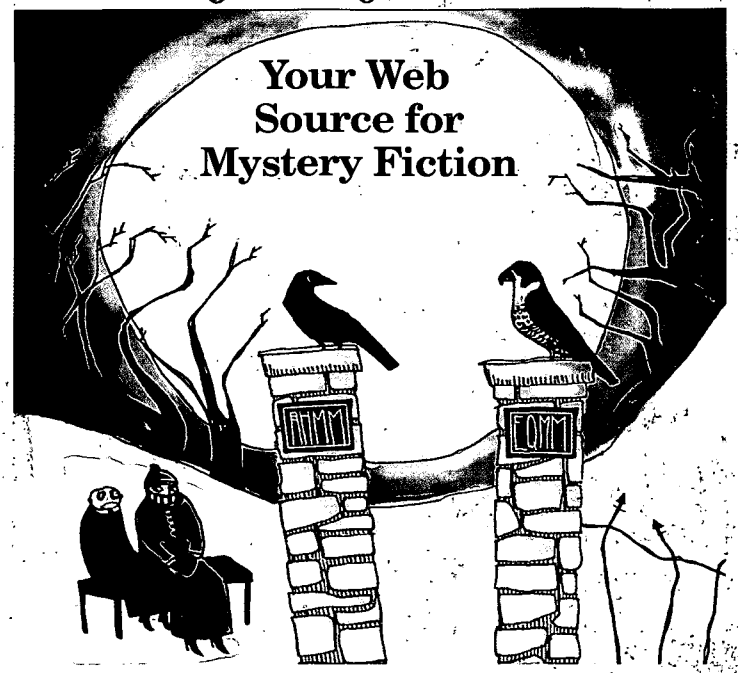
City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Offer expires June 30, 2008. **27C-NZ3CLL**

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TheMysteryPlace.com



Visit www.TheMysteryPlace.com, home of the world's leading short-fiction mystery magazines. Log on and enjoy:

- Excerpts of current stories from the genre's leading authors
- Readers' Forum
- Awards lists
- Book reviews
- Mystery puzzles

All this and much more!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE®

ELLERY QUEEN® MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Visit us at www.themysteryplace.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED